WHEN BEARCAT WENT DRY

By CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

Author of

The Call of the Cumberlands

Maude Turner
1920

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You're agoing to marry me and we're goin' to dwell thar—together

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GEORGE W. GAGE

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OTHER BOOKS
By
CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

THE KEY TO YESTERDAY
THE LIGHTED MATCH
THE PORTAL OF DREAMS
THE CALL OF THE CUMBERLANDS
THE BATTLE CRY
THE CODE OF THE MOUNTAINS
DESTINY
THE TYRANNY OF WEAKNESS

TO

M. F.

WHEN 'BEAR CAT' WENT DRY

CHAPTER I

A CREAKING complaint of loose and rattling boards rose under the old mountaineer's brogans as he stepped from the threshold to the porch. His eyes, searching the wooded mountain-side, held at first only that penetration which born woodsmen share with the hawk and ferret, but presently they kindled into irascibility as well.

He raised his voice in a loud whoop that went skittering off across the rocky creek bed where Little Slippery crawled along to feed the trickle of Big Slippery ten miles below, and the volume of sound broke into a splintering of echoes against the forested crags of the Old Wilderness Ridges.

"You, Turner!" bellowed the man with such a bull-like roar as might have issued from the chest of a Viking. "You, Turner, don't ye heer me a-callin' ye?"

A woman, rawboned and crone-like before her time under the merciless forcing of drudgery, appeared in the door, wiping reddened hands on a coarse cotton apron.

"I reckon he'll be hyar, presently, paw," she suggested in a high-pitched voice meant to be placating. "I reckon he hain't fared far away."

The hodden-gray figure of the man turned to his wife and his voice, as it dropped to conversational pitch, held a surprisingly low and drawling cadence.

"What needcessity did he hev ter go away a-tall?" came his interrogation. "He knowed I aimed ter hev him tote thet gryste acrost ther ridge ter the tub-mill, didn't he? He knows that hits perilous business ter leave corn like that a-layin' 'round, don't he—*sprouted corn!*"

A flash of poignant anxiety clouded the woman's eyes. Corn sprouted in the grain before grinding! She knew well enough what that meant—incrimination in the eyes of the Government—trial, perhaps, and imprisonment.

"Ye 'lowed a long while since, Lone," she reminded him with a trace of wistfulness in her voice, "that ye aimed ter quit makin' blockade licker fer all time. Hit don't pleasure me none ter see ye a-follerin' hit ergin. Seems like thar's a curse on hit from start ter finish."

"I don't foller hit because I delights in hit," he retorted grimly. "But what else is thar ter do? I reckon we've got ter live somehow—hain't we?" For an instant his eyes flared with an upleaping of rebellion; then he turned again on his heel and roared "Turner—you, Turner!"

"Ther boy seemed kinderly fagged out when he come in. I reckon he aimed ter slip off and rest in ther shade somewhars fer a lettle spell afore ye needed him," volunteered the boy's mother, but the suggestion failed to mollify the mounting impatience of the father.

"Fagged! What's fagged him? I hain't never disc'arned nothin' puny about him. He's survigrous enough ter go a-snortin' an' a-stompin' over ther hills like a yearlin' bull, a-honin' fer battle. He's knowed from God's Blessin' Creek ter Hell's Holler by ther name of Bear Cat Stacy, hain't he? Bear Cat Stacy! I'd hate ter take my name from a varmint—but it pleasures him."

"I don't sca'cely b'lieve he seeks no aimless quarrels," argued the mother defensively. "Thar hain't no *meanness* in him. He's jest like you was, Lone, when ye was twenty a-goin' on twenty-one. He's full o' sperrit. I reckon Bear Cat jest means thet he's quick-like an' supple."

"Supple! Hell's torment! Whar's he at now? He's jest about a-layin' somewhar's on his shoulder-blades a-readin' thet everlastin' book erbout Abe Lincoln— You, Turner!"

Then the figure of a young man appeared, swinging along

with an effortless stride down the steep grade of the mountain which was richly mottled with the afternoon sun. He came between giant clusters of flowering laurel, along aisles pink with wild roses and white with the foaming spray of elder blossoms; flanked by masses of colossal rock, and every movement was a note of frictionless power.

Like his father, Turner Stacy measured a full six feet, but age and the yoke of hardship had not yet stooped his fine shoulders nor thickened his slenderness of girth. His face was striking in its clear chiseling of feature and its bronzed color. It would have been arrestingly handsome but for its marring shadow of surliness.

In one hand he held a battered book, palpably one used with the constancy and devotion of a monk's breviary, and a forefinger was still thrust between the dog-eared pages. "Lincoln: Master of Men,"—such was the title of the volume.

As Turner Stacy arrived at the house, his father's uncompromisingly stern eyes dwelt on the book and they were brimming with displeasure.

"Didn't ye know I hed work for ye ter do terday?"

The boy nodded indifferently.

"I 'lowed ye hed ther power ter shout fer me when ye war ready. I wasn't more'n a whoop an' a holler distant."

The mother, hovering in the shadowed interior of the house, listened silently, and a little anxiously. This friction of unbending temper between her husband and son was a thing to which she could never quite accustom herself. Always she was interposing herself as a buffer between their threats of clashing wills.

"Turner," said the elder man slowly, and now he spoke quietly with an effort to curb his irascibililty, "I knows thet boys often-times gits uppety an' brash when they're a-growin' inter manhood. They've got thar growth an' they feel thar strength an' they hain't acquired neither sense ner experience enough ter realize how plumb teetotally much they *don't* know

yit. But speakin' jedgmatically, I hain't never heered tell of no Stacy afore what hain't been loyal ter his family an' ther head of his house. 'Pears like ter me hit pleasures ye beyond all reason ter sot yoreself crost-wise erginst me."

The boy's eyes grew somberly dark as they met those of his father with undeviating steadiness. An analyst would have said that the outward surliness was after all only a mask for an inner questioning—the inarticulate stress of a cramped and aspiring spirit.

"I don't know as ye hev any rightful cause fer ter charge me with bein' disloyal," he answered slowly, as if pondering the accusation. "I hain't never aimed ter contrary ye."

Lone Stacy paused for a moment and then the timbre of his voice acquired the barb of an irony more massive than subtle.

"Air yore heart in torment because ye hain't ther Pres*ident* of ther country, like Abe Lincoln was? Is *thet* why ye don't delight in nothin' save dilitary dreams?"

A slow, brick-red flush suffused the brown cheeks of Bear Cat Stacy, and his answer came with a slowness that was almost halting.

"When Abraham Lincoln was twenty years old he warn't no more Pres*ident* then what I be. Thar hain't many Lincoln's, but any feller kin have ther thing in him, though, thet carried Lincoln up ter whar he went. Any feller kin do his best and want ter do some better. Thet's all I'm aimin' after."

The father studied his son's suddenly animated eyes and inquired drily, "Does this book-l'arnin' teach ye ter lay around plumb ind'lent with times so slavish hard thet I've been pintedly compelled ter start ther still workin' ergin, despite my a-bein' a Christian an' a law-lover: despite my seekin' godliness an' abhorin' iniquity?"

There was in the sober expression of the questioner no cast of hypocrisy or conscious anomaly, and the younger man shook his head.

"I hain't never shirked no labor, neither in ther field ner at ther still, but——" He paused a moment and once more the rebellious light flared in his eyes and he continued with the level steadiness of resolution. "But I hates ter foller thet business, an' when I comes of age I aims ter quit hit."

"Ye aims ter quit hit, does ye?" The old mountaineer forgot, in the sudden leaping of wrath at such unfilial utterances, that he himself had a few minutes before spoken in the same tenor. "Ye aims ter defy me, does ye? Wa'al even afore ye comes of age hit wouldn't hardly hurt ye none ter quit *drinkin'* hit. Ye're too everlastin' good ter *make* blockade licker, but ye hain't none too good ter lay drunk up thar with hit."

This time the boy's flush was one of genuine chagrin and he bit off the instinctive retort that perhaps a realization of this overpowering thirst was the precise thing which haunted him: the exact urge which made him want to break away from a serfdom that held him always chained to his temptation.

"Ye thinks ye're too much like Abe Lincoln ter make blockade licker," went on the angry parent, "but ye hain't above rampagin' about these hills seekin' trouble an' raisin' up enemies whar I've done spent my days aimin' ter consort peaceable with my neighbors. Hit hain't been but a week since ye broke Ratler Webb's nose."

"Hit come about in fair fight—fist an' skull, an' I only hit him oncet."

"Nobody else didn't feel compelled ter hit him even oncet, did they?"

"Mebby not—but he was seekin' ter bulldoze me an' he hurt my feelin's. I'd done laughed hit off twic't."

"An' so ye're a-goin' on a-layin' up trouble erginst ther future. Hit hain't ther *makin'* of licker thet's laid a curse on these hills. Hit's *drinkin'* hit. Ef a man kin walk abroad nowadays without totin' his rifle-gun an' a-dreadin' ther shot from the la'rel, hit's because men like me hev sought day an'

night ter bring about peace. I counseled a truce in ther Stacy-Towers war because I war a Christian an' I didn't 'low thet God favored bloodshed. But ther truce won't hardly last ef ye goes about stirrin' up ructions.

"Bear Cat Stacy!" stormed the older man furiously as his anger fed upon itself. "What air a bear cat anyways? Hit's a beast thet rouses up from sleep an' crosses a mountain fer ther pure pleasure of tearin' out some other critter's throat an' vitals. Hit's a varmint drove on by ther devil's own sperit of hatefulness.

"Even in ther feud days men warred with clean powder an' lead, but sich-like fightin' don't seem ter satisfy ye. Ye hain't got no use fer a rifle-gun. Ye wants ter tear men apart with yore bare hands an' ter plumb rend 'em asunder! I've trod ther streets of Marlin Town with ye, an' watched yore eyes burnin' like hot embers, until peaceable men drew back from ye an' p'inted ye out ter strangers. 'Thar goes ther Bear Cat,' they'd whisper. 'Give him ther whole road!' Even ther town marshal walked in fear of ye an' war a-prayin' ter God Almighty ye wouldn't start nothin'."

"I don't never seek no fight." This time Turner Stacy spoke without shame. "I don't never have no trouble save whar I'm plumb *obleeged* ter hev hit."

"Thet's what Kinnard Towers always 'lowed," was the dry retort, "though he's killed numerous men, and folks says he's hired others killed, too."

The boy met the accusing glance and answered quietly:

"Ye don't favor peace no more than what I do."

"I've aimed ter be both God-fearin' an' law-abidin'," continued the parent whose face and figure might have been cast in bronze as a type of the American pioneer, "yet ye censures me fer makin' untaxed licker!" His voice trembled with a repressed thunder of emotion.

"I've seed times right hyar on this creek when fer ther most part of a whole winter we hurted fer salt an' thar warn't none

to be had fer love nor money. Thar warn't no money in these hills nohow—an' damn'-little love ter brag about. Yore maw an' me an' Poverty dwelt hyar tergether—ther three of us. We've got timber an' coal an' no way ter git hit ter market. Thar's jest only one thing we kin turn inter money or store-credit—an' thet's our corn run inter white licker."

He paused as if awaiting a reply and when his son volunteered none he swept on to his peroration. "When I makes hit now I takes numerous chances, an' don't complain. Some revenuer, a-settin' on his hunkers, takin' life easy an' a-waitin' fer a fist full of blood money is liable ter meet up in ther highway with some feller thet's nursin' of a grudge erginst me or you. Hit's plumb risky an' hits damn'-hard work, but hit hain't no wrong-doin' an' ef yore grandsires an' yore father hain't been above hit, I rekon *you* hain't above hit neither."

Turner Stacy was still standing on the porch, with one finger marking the place where he had left off reading his biography of Lincoln—the master of men.

Born of a line of stoics, heir to laconic speech and reared to stifle emotions, he was inarticulate and the somberness of his eyes, which masked a pageantry of dreams and a surging conflict in his breast, seemed only the surliness of rebellion.

He looked at his father and his mother, withered to sereness by their unrelenting battle with a life that had all been frost-bite until even their power of resentment for its injustice had guttered out and dried into a dull acceptance.

His fingers gripped the book. Abraham Lincoln had, like himself, started life in a log house and among crude people. Probably he, too, had in those early days no one who could give an understanding ear to the whispering voices that urged him upward. At first the urge itself must have been blurred of detail and shadowy of object.

Turner's lips parted under an impulse of explanation, and closed again into a more hopelessly sullen line. The older

man had chafed too long in heavy harness to comprehend a new vision. Any attempt at self-expression would be futile.

So the picture he made was only that of a headstrong and wilful junior who had listened unmoved to reason, and a mounting resentment kindled in the gaze of the bearded moonshiner.

"I've done aimed ter talk reason with ye," barked the angry voice, "an' hit don't seem ter convince ye none. Ef ther pattern of life I've sot ye hain't good enough, do ye think ye're better than yore maw, too?"

"I didn't never say ye warn't good enough." The boy found himself freezing into defiant stiffness under this misconstruction until his very eagerness to be understood militated against him.

"Wa'al, I'll tell ye a thing I don't talk a heap about. Hit's a thing thet happened when ye was a young baby. I spent two y'ars in prison then fer makin' white whiskey."

"You!" Turner Stacy's eyes dilated with amazement and the older face hardened with a baleful resentment.

"Hit warn't jest bein' put in ther jail-house thet I kain't fergit ner fergive so long as I goes on livin'. Hit war ther *reason*. Ye talks mighty brash erbout ther sacredness of ther Revenue laws—wa'al, listen ter me afore ye talks any more." He paused and then continued, as if forcing himself to an unwelcome recital.

"I've always borne the name hyarabouts of bein' a law-abidin' citizen and a man thet could be trusted. I'd hoped ter bring peace to the mountings, but when they lawed me and sent me down to Looeyville fer trial, ther Govern*ment* lawyer 'lowed thet sence I was a prominent citizen up hyar a-breakin' of the law, they had ought to make a sample of me. Because my reputation was good I got two y'ars. Ef hit hed been bad, I mout hev come cl'ar."

The son took an impulsive step forward, but with an im-

perious wave of the hand, his father halted him and the chance for a sympathetic understanding was gone.

"Hold on! I hain't quite done talkin' yit. In them days we war livin' over ther ridge, whar Little Ivy heads up. You thinks this hyar's a pore fashion of dwellin'-house, but *thet* one hed jest a single room an' na'ry a winder in all hits four walls. You're maw war right ailin' when they tuck me away ter ther big Co'te an' she war mighty young, too, an' purty them days afore she broke. Thar warn't no man left ter raise ther crops, an' *you* ra'red like a young calf ef ye didn't git yore vittles reg'lar.

"I reckon mebby ye hain't hardly got no proper idee how long two y'ars kin string out ter be when a man's sulterin' behind bars with a young wife an' a baby thet's liable ter be starvin' meanwhile! I reckon ye don't hardly realize how I studied down thar in prison about ther snow on these God-forsaken hillsides an' ther wind whirrin' through ther chinks. But mebby ye *kin* comprehend this hyar fact. *You'd* hev pintedly starved ter death, ef yore maw hedn't rigged up a new still in place of ther one the Govern*ment* confiscated, an' made white licker all ther time I was down thar sarvin' time. *She* did thet an' paid off ther interest on the mortgage an' saved a leetle mite for me erginst ther day when I come home. Now air ye sich a sight better then yore maw was?"

A yellow flood of sunlight fell upon the two figures and threw into a relief of high lights their two faces; one sternly patriarchal and rugged, the other vitally young and spare of feature.

Corded arteries appeared on Bear Cat's temples and, as he listened, the nails of his fingers bit into the flesh of his palms, but his father swept on, giving him no opportunity to reply.

"My daddy hed jest shortly afore been lay-wayed an' killed by some Towers murderer, an' his property had done been parceled out amongst his children. Thar wasn't but jest fourteen of us ter heir hit an' nobody got much. When they

tuck me down ter ther big Co'te I had ter hire me a lawyer—an' thet meant a mortgage. Yore maw hedn't, up ter then, been used ter sich-like slavish poverty. She could hev married mighty nigh any man in these parts—an' she tuck me.

"Whilst I war a-layin' thar in jail a-tormentin' myself with my doubtin' whether either one of ye would weather them times alive, *she* was a-runnin' ther still hyar in my stead. Many's the day she tromped over them hills through ther snow an' mud with *you* a-whimperin' on her breast an' wropped in a shawl thet she needed her own self. Many's ther night she tromped back ergin an' went hongry ter bed, so's *you* could have plenty ter eat, when thar warn't sca'cely enough ter divide betwixt ye. But them things *she* did in famine days, *you're* too sanctified ter relish now."

Turner Stacy trembled from head to foot. It seemed to him that he could see that grim picture in retrospect and despite his stoic's training his eyes burned with unshed tears. Loyalty to kith and kin is the cornerstone of every mountain man's religion, the very grail of his faith. Into his eyes blazed a tawny, tigerish light, but words choked in his throat and his father read, in his agitation, only a defiance which was no part of his thought.

"Now, see hyar," he went on with mounting autocracy, "I've done told ye things I don't oftentimes discuss. I've done reasoned with ye an' now I commands ye! Ye hain't of age yit and until ye do be, ye've got to do as I bids ye. Atter that, ef ye aims to turn yore back on yore family ye can do hit, an' I reckon we can go our two ways. That's all I got to say to ye. Now pick up that sack of gryste an' be gone with hit."

The boy's face blackened and his muscles tautened under the arrogant domineering of the edict. For a moment he neither spoke nor stirred from his place, though his chest heaved with the fulness of his breathing. The elder man moved ominously forward and his tone was violently truculent.

"Air ye goin' ter obey me or do I hev ter *make* ye? Thar's

a sayin' thet come acrost ther waters thet no man kin lick his own daddy. I reckon hit still holds good."

Still the son remained as unmoving as bronze while his eyes sustained unflinchingly the wrathful gaze of a patriarchal order. Then he spoke in a voice carefully schooled to quietness.

"As to thet sayin'," he suggested evenly, "I reckon mebbe hit mought be disproved, but I hain't aimin' to try hit. Ye've done said some right-hard things to-day an' some thet wasn't hardly justified—but I aims ter fergit 'em."

Suddenly, by virtue of a leaping light in his eyes, the boy in jeans and hodden-gray stood forth strangely transfigured. Some spirit revelation seemed to have converted him into a mystifying incarnation of latent, if uncomprehended power. It was as startling as though a road-side beggar had tossed aside a drab cloak and hood of rags and revealed beneath it, the glitter of helmet and whole armor.

"I aims ter fergit hit all," he repeated. "But don't seek ter fo'ce me ner ter drive me none—fer thet's a thing I kain't hardly suffer. As fur as a man kin go outen loyalty I'll go fer *you*—but I've got ter go in my own fashion—an' of my own free will. Ye've done said that I went erbout seekin' trouble an' I hain't got no doubt ye believes what ye says albeit most of hit's false. Ye says I lays drunk sometimes. Thet's true an' hit's a shameful thing fer a man ter admit, but hit's a thing I've got ter fight out fer myself. Hit don't profit neither of us fer ye ter vilify me."

He broke off abruptly, his chest heaving, and to Lone Stacy it seemed that the air was electrically charged, as with the still tensity that goes, windless and breathless, before the bursting of thunder heads among the crags. Then Bear Cat spoke again somewhat gropingly and with inarticulate faultiness, as though a flood pressure were seeking egress through a choked channel. The words were crude, but back of them was a dammed-up meaning like the power of hurricane and

forest fire. "Thar's somethin' in me—I don't know how ter name it—thar's somethin' in me sort of strugglin' an' a-drivin' me like a torment! Thet weakness fer licker—I hates hit like —like all hell—but I hain't *all* weakness! Thet thing, whatever hit be—sometimes jest when hit seems like hit ought ter raise me up—hit crushes me down like the weight of ther mountings themselves."

He wheeled suddenly and disappeared into the house where he deposited his book on the mantel-shelf and from behind the door swung a grain sack to his shoulder. Then he left the house.

Lone Stacy turned to his wife and lifted his hands with a gesture of baffled perplexity as he inquired, "Does ye understand ther boy? He's our own blood an' bone, but sometimes I feels like I was talkin' ter a person from a teetotally diff'rent world. Nobody round hyar don't comprehend him. I've even heered hit norated round amongst foolish folks thet he talks with graveyard ha'nts an' hes a witch-craft charm on his life. Air he jest headstrong, maw, or air he so master big thet we kain't comprehend him? No man hain't never called me a coward, but thar's spells when I'm half-way skeered of my own boy."

"Mebby," suggested the woman quietly, "ef ye gentled him a leetle mite he wouldn't contrary ye so much."

Lone Stacy nodded his head and spoke with a grim smile. "Seems like I've got ter be eternally blusterin' at him jest ter remind myself thet I'm ther head of this fam'ly. Ef I didn't fo'ce myself ter git mad, I'd be actin' like he was my daddy instid of me bein' his'n."

CHAPTER II

THE afternoon was half spent and the sun, making its way toward the purpled ridges of the west, was already casting long shadows athwart the valleys. Along a trail which wound itself in many tortuous twists across forested heights and dipped down to lose itself at intervals in the creek bed of Little Slippery, a mounted traveler rode at a snail-like pace. The horse was a lean brute through whose rusty coat the ribs showed in under-nourished prominence, but it went sure-footedly up and down broken stairways of slimy ledges where tiny waterfalls licked at its fetlocks and along the brinks of chasms where the sand shelved with treacherous looseness.

The rider, a man weather-rusted to a drab monotone, slouched in his saddle with an apathetic droop which was almost stupor, permitting his reins to flap loosely. His face, under an unclean bristle of beard, wore a sleepy sneer and his eyes were bloodshot from white whiskey.

As he rode, unseeing, through the magnificent beauty of the Cumberlands his glance was sluggish and his face emotionless. But at last the horse halted where a spring came with a crystal gush out of the rhododendron thickets, and then Ratler Webb's stupefaction yielded to a semi-wakefulness of interest. He rubbed a shoddy coat-sleeve across his eyes and straightened his stooped shoulders. The old horse had thrust his nose thirstily into the basin with evident eagerness to drink. Yet, after splashing his muzzle about for a moment he refused refreshment and jerked his head up with a snort of disgust. A leering smile parted the man's lips over his yellow and uneven teeth:

"So ye won't partake of hit, old Bag-o'-bones, won't ye?" he inquired ironically. "Ye hain't nobody's brag critter to look at, but I reckon some revenue fellers mought be willin' to pay a master price fer ye. Ye kin stand at ther mouth of a spring-branch an' smell a still-house cl'ar up on hits head-waters, kain't ye?"

For a while Webb suffered the tired horse to stand panting in the creek bed, while his own eyes, lit now with a crafty livening, traveled up the hillside impenetrably masked with verdure, where all was silence. Somewhere up along the water-course was the mash-vat and coil which had contaminated this basin for his mount's brute fastidiousness: an illicit distillery. This man clad in rusty store clothes was not inspired with a crusading ardor for supporting the law. He lived among men whose community opinion condones certain offenses—and pillories the tale-bearer. But above the ethical bearing of local standards and Federal Statutes, alike, loomed a matter of personal hatred, which powerfully stimulated his curiosity. He raised one hand and thoughtfully stroked his nose—recently broken with workman-like thoroughness and reset with amateurish imperfection.

"Damn thet Bear Cat Stacy," he muttered, as he kicked his weary mount into jogging motion. "I reckon I'll hev my chance at him yit. I'm jest a-waitin' fer hit."

A half-mile further on, he suddenly drew rein and remained in an attitude of alert listening. Then slipping quietly to the ground, he hitched his horse in the concealment of a deep gulch and melted out of sight into the thicket. Soon he sat crouched on his heels, invisible in the tangled laurel. His place of vantage overlooked a foot-path so little traveled as to be hardly discernible, but shortly a figure came into view around a hulking head of rock, and Ratler Webb's smile broadened to a grin of satisfaction. The figure was tall and spare and it stooped as it plodded up the ascent under the weight of a heavy sack upon its shoulders. The observer did

not move or make a sound until the other man had been for several minutes out of sight. He was engaged in reflection.

"So, thet's how ther land lays," he ruminated. "Bear Cat Stacy's totin' thet gryste over to Bud Jason's tub-mill on Little Ivy despite ther fact thet thar's numerous bigger mills nigher to his house. Thet sack's full of *sprouted* corn, and he dasn't turn it in at no *reg'lar* mill. Them Stacys air jest about blockadin' up thet spring-branch."

He spat at a toad which blinked beadily up at him and then, rising from his cramped posture, he commented, "I hain't plumb dead sartin yet, but I aims ter be afore sun-up termorrer."

Bear Cat Stacy might have crossed the ridge that afternoon by a less devious route than the one he followed. In so doing he would have saved much weariness of leg and ache of burdened shoulder, but Ratler Webb's summing up had been correct, and though honest corn may follow the highways, sprouted grain must go by blinder trails.

When he reached the backbone of the heights, he eased the jute sack from his shoulders to the ground and stretched the cramp out of his arms. Sweat dripped from his face and streamed down the brown throat where his coarse shirt stood open. He had carried a dead weight of seventy pounds across a mountain, and must carry back another as heavy.

Now he wiped his forehead with his shirt-sleeve and stood looking away with a sudden distraction of dreaminess. A few more steps would take him again into the steamy swelter of woods where no breath of breeze stirred the still leafage, and even in the open spaces the afternoon was torridly hot. But here he could sweep with his eyes league upon league of a vast panorama where sky and peak mingled in a glory of purple haze. Unaccountably the whole beauty of it smote him with a sense of undefined appreciation and grateful wonderment. The cramp of heart was eased and the groping voices

of imagination seemed for the time no longer tortured nightmares of complaint.

There was no one here to censor his fantasies and out of the gray eyes went their veiling sullenness and out of the lips their taut grimness. Into eyes and lips alike came something else—something touched with the zealousness of aspiration.

"Hit's right over thar!" he murmured aloud but in a voice low pitched and caressing of tone. "I've got ter get me money enough ter buy thet farm offen Kinnard Towers."

He was looking down upon a point far below him where through a cleared space flashed the shimmer of flowing water, and where in a small pocket of acreage, the bottom ground rolled in gracious amenability to the plow and harrow.

Again he nodded, and since he was quite alone he laughed aloud.

"She 'lows thet's ther place whar she wants ter live at," he added to himself, "an' I aims ter satisfy her."

So after all some of his day-dreams were tangible!

He realized that he ought to be going on, yet he lingered and after a few moments he spoke again, confiding his secrets to the open woods and the arching skies—his only confidants.

"Blossom 'lowed yestiddy she was a-goin' over ter Aunt Jane Colby's this mornin'. 'Pears like she ought ter be passin' back by hyar about this time."

Cupping his hands at his lips, he sent out a long whoop, but before he did that he took the precaution of concealing his sack of sprouted grain under a ledge. Then he bent listening for an answer—but without reward, and disappointment mantled in his gray eyes as he dropped to the age-corroded rock and sat with his hands clasped about his updrawn knees.

It was very still there, except for the industrious hammering of a "peckerwood" on a decayed tree trunk, and the young mountaineer sat almost as motionless as his pedestal.

Then without warning a lilting peal of laughter sounded

at his back and Turner came to his feet. As he wheeled he saw Blossom Fulkerson standing there above him and her eyes were dancing with the mischievous delight of having stalked him undiscovered.

"It's a right happy thing fer you, Turner Stacy, that I didn't aim ter kill ye," she informed him with mock solemnity. "I've heered ye brag thet no feller hereabouts could slip up on ye in the woods, unbeknownst."

"I wasn't studyin' erbout nobody slippin' up on me, Blossom," he answered calmly. "I hain't got no cause ter be a-hidin' out from nobody."

She was standing with the waxen green of the laurel breaking into pink flower-foam at her back and through the oak and poplar branches showed scraps of blue sky—the blue of June.

A catch came into Turner's voice and he said somewhat huskily, "When they christened ye Blossom they didn't misname ye none."

Blossom, he thought, was like a wild-rose growing among sun-flowers. When the evening star came up luminous and dewy-fresh over the darkening peaks, while twilight still lingered at the edges of the world, he always thought of her.

But the charm was not all in his own eye: not all the magic endowment of first love. The mountain preacher's daughter had escaped those slovenly habits of backwoods life that inevitably coarsen. Her beauty had slender strength and flower freshness.

Now she stood holding with one hand to the gnarled branch of a dogwood sapling. A blue sunbonnet falling back from her head left the abundance of her hair bared to the light so that it shimmered between brown and gold.

She was perhaps sixteen and her heavily lashed eyes were brownish amber and just now full of a mirthful sparkle.

"Ye seemed ter be studyin' about somethin' almighty hard," she insisted teasingly. "I thought for a minute that mebbe ye'd done growed thar."

Turner Stacy smiled again as he looked at her. In his eyes was unveiled and honest worship.

"I was a'studyin' about *you,* Blossom. I don't know no way ter do that save almighty hard. Didn't ye hear me whoop?"

The girl's head nodded.

"Why didn't ye answer me?"

"I aimed ter slip up on ye, if I could, Turner, but I didn't low it would be so plumb easy.—You made believe that yore ears could hear the grass a-growin'."

The youth took a sudden step toward her and stood close, so close that her breath touched his face fragrantly as she looked up with a witching mockery in her eyes. His heart fluttered with the clamor of impulse to seize her in his arms, but his half-lifted hands dropped to his sides.

He was not quite twenty-one and she was only sixteen, and the code of the mountains is strict with the simplicity of the pioneer. A woman gives her lips in betrothal or, giving them lightly, drops to the caste of a light woman.

So the boy drew back with a resolute jerk of his head.

"I was a-studyin' erbout some day, Blossom," he said, "when thar's a-goin' ter be a dwellin'-house down thar. Not a house of warped timbers whar the hawgs scratch their backs under the floors—but a *real* house. Mebby by thet day an' time thar'll be a highway men kin travel without torment." As he paused, at a loss for power of architectural enlargement, the girl sighed.

"Then I reckon ye don't hardly 'low ter raise thet house in my lifetime, Turner," she teased. "I'll most likely be too old ter visit ye thar afore a highway gits built."

But he shook his head. "I aims ter speed up ther comin' of sich things," he announced with the splendid effrontery of youth. "Hit hain't been so long since ther fust wagon crossed Cedar Mountain. We're liable to see balloons comin' afore we die."

"Aunt Jane Colby was tellin' me about that first wagon today at dinner," Blossom assented. "She says one old man asked folks whether it was true or whether he was fitified. He said: 'What manner of *contrivance* air thet? Hit's got four wheels an' one pair's bigger then t'other pair, an' two of 'em goes round faster then t'other two an' the Lord A'mighty only knows how hit manages ter keep up with hitself.'"

They both laughed with young condescension for the old-fashioned and then Turner went on, haltingly by reason of callow diffidence.

"Ef thet house couldn't be reared in time fer *you* ter come to hit, Blossom—hit wouldn't be no manner of use ter me a-tall."

"Does ye aim ter make me a present of a house?" she challenged and again the provocative allurement of her swept him so that the smooth sinews of his arms tightened as if with physical effort.

"I means thet someday—when I've done something worth doin' an' when ye're a leetle bit older yoreself, Blossom, you're agoin' ter marry me, an' we're goin' ter dwell thar—together."

The girl's cheeks reddened furiously and for a moment she made no response, then she declared with a stout self-assertion designed to mask her confusion, "I reckon I'll hev somethin' ter say about thet."

"Ye'll have *everything* ter say about hit, Blossom, but"—there was a purposeful ring in his voice that hinted at ultimate victory—"but some day I aims ter persuade ye ter say, 'yes.'"

Her cheeks were brightly pink and she pretended to be engrossed in the demeanor of a squirrel that chattered quarrelsomely at them from a nearby poplar. Turner Stacy dropped his voice until it was very soft.

"I kin bide my time an' wait twell ye're ready, Blossom,

but if ye don't *never* say hit, I don't hardly see how I kin go on livin'."

"I'm right glad ef ye likes me, Turner," she demurely assured him. "We've growed up together an' ef ye was to go away somewhar's an' leave me, I reckon I'd nigh die of lonesomeness."

Distrust of effusiveness was bred in his bone. Laconic utterance was his heritage, and now that his heart demanded expression and his eyes kindled with the dreamer's fire, he stood struggling against the fettering of his tongue. Then abruptly, tumultuously he burst out, talking fast.

"I hain't got ther gift of speech, Blossom; I only knows thet hit hain't enough ter jest have ye miss me ef I went away. I knows thet when ye stands thar with ther sun on yore hair hit would be springtime fer me, even ef thar war snow on ther hillsides an' ice in ther creek. I knows thet I'm standin' hyar on solid rock. Yore paw says these-hyar hills were old when ther Alps hadn't riz up yit outen ther waters, but when I looks at ye, Blossom, this mountain's shakin' under me . . . an' yore face is ther only thing thet's steady afore my eyes."

He broke off with something like a choke in his throat and Blossom was trembling a little under that first impact of new emotion that comes with the waking of the senses. Then she remembered the stories of his escapades and her eyes clouded. Her hand fell flutteringly on his arm.

"If—if ye cares thet much about me, Turner, I wish—I don't aim ter nag ye—but I wish ye'd promise me thet ye won't give men cause ter say ye drinks too much."

Turner's brow contracted and his lips stiffened. The defensive mask which seemed sullen because it was his idea of impassiveness set itself again, but he nodded.

"Thet's a fair thing," he said slowly at last. "Drinkin' hain't hardly a thing a gal kin understand noways. I hain't jest a common drunkard, Blossom. Thar's times though when

I feels es ef I war a-livin' in a jail-house—an' seekin' ter git free. Thar's su'thin' in me—I don't know jest what—thet's always fightin'. These hyar hills with their ign'rance an' dirt an' poverty seems ter be on top of me 'stid of underneath me. Thet's when I drinks too much. Fer a little spell I seems ter dream I'm free."

A few minutes later the girl started down the "yon" side of the wooded slope, going with a light step and humming a ballade that had come across the sea with the beginnings of America, and the boy looked after her with a passionate tenderness that was far from stoical.

If most of his dreams were intangible and misty, this, his greatest and brightest dream, was at least clear and vivid.

When he could no longer see the flash of her blue dress between the interlacing branches he turned, and drawing his sack of sprouted corn out of its hiding place, hefted it to his shoulders. He would have to hurry now to finish his task and get back by dusk.

CHAPTER III

OLD man Bud Jason stood at the door of his tub-mill, leaning on the long hickory staff which he always carried. He stood gauntly tall even now that his once-broad shoulders sagged and his mane of hair was white, and from his lips came a querulous mumbling as though he were awaiting some one tardy of arrival. At last, though, he gave a grunt of relief when the thicket far above him stirred and the figure of Bear Cat Stacy appeared, bending under his load of grist.

He turned then into the shack and drew out a sack of meal from the bottom of a pile, and as he finished this task a shadow fell across the door. Turner Stacy let his burden fall and availed himself of the opportunity to drop into a sitting posture on the step of the shanty, resting his back against a post. His broad chest heaved and a profound sigh of relief broke from his panting lips. The old miller stood regarding him for a little while without words, then broke into volcanic utterance:

"Hell's banjer! May God Almighty holp a country whar a young pa'r of shoulders like your'n don't find no worthier use than man-powerin' good corn acrost ther ridges ter turn hit inter bad licker."

Turner Stacy glanced up with mild surprise for the sentiment.

"I hain't nuver heered ye cavil with a man's license ter use his own corn as he sees fit, afore, Bud," was his casual reply, and the white-bearded one wagged his head and laughed tremulously after the fashion of the old.

"I reckon ye don't mistrust me none, Bear Cat, even ef I does hit now, but here of late I've cogitated a heap whilst I've

been a-settin' hyar listenin' ter ther creak of that old mill. Seems almost like ther wheel was a-lamentin' over hits job. Thar bein' sich a sight of wickedness in ther community whar my grand-children hes got ter be reared up is a powerful solemn thing fer me ter study over, an' I've jes erbout concluded thet whilst ther whiskey-makin' goes on ther killin's an' gin'ral wickedness won't hardly diminish none."

Furrows of dubious thought etched themselves on the young man's forehead.

"Ef ye feels thet-a-way, Bud, why does yer consent ter grind corn fer blockaders?" he demanded, and the reply was prompt:

"I don't grind hit only fer a few men thet I'm beholden to." Pausing a moment, he became more specific. "Yore paw stood over my body onct when I'd done been shot outen my saddle, an' fought off numerous enemies single-handed, thereby savin' me from death in ther creekbed. I couldn't hardly deny *him* ther use of my mill even ef his corn *hes* got sprouts in ther grain two inches long, now, could I?"

The boy looked abstractedly away, then suddenly blurted out: "I disgusts blockadin', too, Bud, but pap 'lows hit's ther only way ter mek a livin' hyarabouts."

"Lots of folks argues hit out in like fashion, but I don't hold with 'em." The speaker rapped the boards with his long staff and spoke with conviction. "What these mountings needs air a mite of l'arnin' an' a leetle common sense an' a heap of good roads. Ef prosperity ever comes ter these hills, sonny, hit'll come along a highway—an' so long as stills don't thrive none along highways, hit looks mightily like a sorry chance." After a thoughtful pause he added, "Hit won't never change, so long es hits only furriners thet aims ter alter hit. Revenuers kain't do nothin'. Damn thar skunk hides anyhow! They're our mortal enemies." The old man drew himself up as if he were seeing a vision and his eyes held an almost fanatical gleam. "But mark down my words! Some day thar'll rise

up a mountain man—a man thet hain't never met up with fear an thet's as steadfast as ther hills he sprung from. *Thet* man will change hit all, like ther sun changes fog. I wisht I mout live ter see thet day."

"Hit'll tek a powerful towerin' man ter bring sich things ter pass," mused the listener and the oracle declared vehemently:

"Hit teks a powerful towerin' man ter lead any fight ter victory, whether hit's a-guidin' ther Children of Israel outen thar bondage or our benighted children outen thars."

Suddenly the miller laid a trembling hand on the boy's arm and demanded in a hushed voice: "Why shouldn't hit be you, Bear Cat? Folks says ye bears a charmed life, thet thar hain't enough lead in ther mountings ter kill ye. I heered Kinnard Towers say with my own ears, thet hit war a God's blessin' ther feud ended afore ye got yore growth—an' Kinnard don't fear many. When a man thet's hardly nothin' but a saplin' of a boy bears a repute like thet—hit must denote thet thar's power in him beyond ther common!"

The boy stood silent for a moment and slowly his brow drew into a black scowl.

"I reckon, Bud, one reason air this," he said bitterly, "thet I'm accounted ter be a drunkard my own self an' like as not, one sich reason es thet air plenty."

Turner glanced up to the bristling ridge which he must climb. Already the west was kindling into a flare of richness and the skyline hills were dyed with ashy purple.

"I've done over-tarried," he said abruptly, as he lifted his sack from the floor, but his face wore a glow which was not altogether from the sinking sun. "I reckon I'd better be on my way—but I hain't denyin' thet I've done hed thoughts like your'n myself, Bud."

But young Stacy had not gone far when that sense of intensified woodcraft which Blossom had derided caused him to halt dead in his tracks.

The sound that had first arrested him had been nothing more than a laugh, but, in it, he had recognized a quality that bespoke derisive hostility and a thickness that indicated drink.

He had left the place empty except for Old Bud Jason and no one could have reached it, unannounced by normal sounds, so soon unless the approach had been achieved by stealth.

Bear Cat Stacy put down his sack and worked his way back, holding the concealment of rock and laurel; guarding each footfall against the betrayal of a broken twig—and, as yet, denied a view of the tub-mill. But his ears were open and doing duty for his eyes.

"Wa'al," came the miller's voice in a wrathful tremolo, "what business brings ye hyar es ef ye war aimin' ter lay-way somebody? Folks gin'rally comes hither upstandin'—an' open."

This time the voice of the new arrival was sneeringly truculent:

"Does they come thet-a-way when they fotches in sprouted corn thet they dastn't take elsewhere?"

Bear Cat stiffened as he recognized the voice of Ratler Webb, whom he had not met since their encounter in which a nose had been broken. He knew that in the breast of this man, hitherto unchallenged as neighborhood bully, an ugly and dangerous grudge was festering.

Now it seemed that the old miller, because of friendship for the Stacys was to be heckled, and Bear Cat's wrath boiled. He heard Bud Jason inquiring in tones no longer querulous but firmly indignant:

"Is thet all ye come fer? Ter blackguard me?"

Ratler answered in a voice savoring more of highwayman's coercion than request.

"I was jest a-funnin' with ye, Old Bud, but I'd be mighty obleeged ter ye fer a leetle dram of licker. My bottle's nigh empty an' I've got a far way ter travel yit."

Turner Stacy had now arrived at a point from which he

could see around the hulking shoulder of sandstone and the picture which met his eye was not reassuring.

The miller stood barring the door to his shack and the visitor, inflamed of eye, a little unsteady on his feet, confronted him with a swagger of lawless daredeviltry.

"I hain't got no licker. I don't never use hit," replied Jason curtly. "So ef thet's all thet brought ye hyar, ye've already got yore answer an' ye mout es well be farin' on."

Webb's leer darkened to malignity and his voice came in a snarl.

"Ye hain't hardly got no tolerance fer drinkin', hes ye, Bud? Albeit ye hain't none too sanctified ter grind up all ther sprouted corn thet other fellers fotches in ter ye."

The old fellow was alone and unarmed save for his hickory staff, but he was vested with that authority which stiffens a man, standing on his own threshold and facing an insolent trespasser. His manner was choleric and crisp in its note of command.

"I don't aim ter waste no time caviliin' with a drunken carouser. I bids ye ter leave my place. Begone!"

But the traveler, inflamed with the venom of the drunken bully, lurched forward, whipping a revolver from its sagging pocket. With an oath he rammed the muzzle close against the pit of the other's stomach.

Bud's level eyes did not falter. He gripped his useless hickory as if it had been a lictor's staff of unchallengeable office. Perhaps that steady moment saved his life, for before his assailant's flood of obscene vilification had reached its period, Ratler Webb leaped back—interrupted. He changed front, wheeling to protect his back against the logs of the rude wall and thrusting his pistol before him, while his jaw sagged abruptly in dismay.

Bear Cat stood facing him, ten yards distant, and his right hand was thrust into his opened shirt, under the armpit, where the mountain man carries his holster. That the

position of the hand was a bluff, covering an unarmed helplessness, Ratler Webb did not know.

"Air ye follerin' revenuin' these days, Ratler?" inquired Stacy in a voice of such velvet softness that the other responded only with an incoherent snarl. "Because ef ye air, numerous folks hyarabouts will be right glad ter find out who it *is* that's informin' on 'em."

"Damn ye! Keep thet hand whar hit's at!" ordered the aggressor violently and like the cornered rat he had become doubly dangerous. He had set out only to torture a defenseless victim, and now it seemed a question of killing or being killed, so he loaded his voice with truculence as he went on.

"Ef ye seeks ter draw hit out or come a step frontwards, so help me Almighty God I'll kill ye in yore tracks!"

Turner Stacy smiled. Upon his ability to do so with a semblance of quiet contempt he was staking everything.

"Shoot whenever ye gits ready, Ratler," he challenged. "But don't do hit onless ye're expectin' ter die, too. When this trigger-work commences, I aims ter *git* ye."

"Move a hand or a foot then, an' see—" The voice was desperately high pitched and nasal now, almost falsetto, but through its threat Bear Cat recognized an undercurrent of sudden terror. The desperado remembered that his horse stood hitched a quarter of a mile away. His right boot sole had been freshly patched and left a clearly identifying mark in the mud. He had prepared no alibi in advance, and within a few hours after Turner fell scores of his kinsmen would be baying on the trail.

"Shoot!" taunted Bear Cat Stacy. "Why don't ye shoot?" —and then with an effrontery which dazed his antagonist, he deliberately moved several steps forward—halting nearer the pistol's muzzle.

"I don't aim ter kill ye onless I has ter," stormed Webb with weakening assurance. "Halt! I'm givin' ye fa'r warnin'. Hit's self-*dee*fense ef ye crowds me."

Stacy spoke again, standing once more motionless.

"Ye couldn't shoot thet pistol at me ef I walked in on ye with my hands over my head. My time hain't come yit ter die, because ther's things I was born ter do—an' God Almighty aims ter hev me live till I've done 'em. He don't aim ter hev me hurt by no coward like you, I reckon. Ye couldn't shoot any man noways whilst his eyes was lookin' full at ye. Ye has need ter lay hid in ther la'rel afore ye kin pull yore trigger finger. I dares ye to shoot!"

The white-bearded miller stood motionless, too, measuring all the chances. For a moment he wondered whether it would be possible to strike up the armed hand with his long staff, but he wisely repressed the impulse. This after all was a new sort of combat, a duel of wills rather than of weapons. He knew that Bear Cat Stacy was unarmed because he had so recently seen the sweat-drenched shirt clinging close to the arched chest.

Ratler Webb's hand no longer trembled with the uncertainty of tipsiness. His eyes were no longer obfuscated and muddled with whiskey fumes. He had reverted to the feral instincts of desperation—and was suddenly sobered.

He gripped his out-thrust pistol in both hands for greater surety and half-crouched with knees bent under him, ready either to spring or brace himself against attack. His eyes, gleaming with blood-passion, traveled shiftily so that he could keep watch on both his possible adversaries.

The other and younger man stood upright, but his muscles, too, were poised and balanced with all nicety of readiness and his eyes were measuring the distance between: gauging sundry odds of life and death.

For a moment more the tableau held in silence. Both the miller and the boy could hear the labored, almost gasping breath of the man with the pistol and both knew that the mean temper of his heart's metal was weakening.

Then when a squirrel barked from the timber, Ratler Webb

started violently and above the stubble of dirty beard, sweat drops began to ooze on his face.

Why didn't Bear Cat Stacy say something? Why didn't somebody move? If he fired now he must kill both men or leave a witness to blab deadly information close on the heels of his flight! In his heart welled a rising tide of panic.

Turner knew by instinct that every moment he could hold Ratler there with his pistol leveled, was for the desperado, a moment of weakening resolve and nerve-breaking suspense. But he also knew another thing. When the strain of that waiting snapped Ratler would either run or shoot. Mountain annals hold more instances of the latter decision that the former, but that was the chance to be taken.

Webb carried a notched gun. He had forced many fights in his day, but in all of them there had been the swift tonic of action and little time to think. Now he dared not lower his weapon in surrender—and he was afraid to fire. He felt that his lips were growing dry and thickening. He thrust out his tongue to lick them, and its red tip gave, to his ugly features, a strange grotesqueness.

Under the brown of wind and sun and the red of liquor-flush his face paled perceptibly. Then it grew greenish yellow with a sick clamminess of dread.

At last with a discernible quaver in his voice he broke the unendurable silence, and his words came brokenly and disjointed:

"I didn't aim ter force no quarrel on ye, Bear Cat. . . . Ef ye plumb compels me ter do hit, I've got ter kill ye, but I hain't a-hankerin' none fer ther task."

"Thet's a lie, too. Ye come hyar a-seekin' of *evidence* because ye're harborin' a grudge erginst me an' ye dastn't satisfy hit no other way."

There was a pause, then Webb said slowly, and with a half-heartedness from which all the effrontery had ebbed:

"I 'lows ter go on erbout my business now, but if either

one of ye moves from whar ye're standin' twell I'm outen range I aims ter kill ye both."

Shifting his revolver to his right hand and feeling behind him with his left, he began backing away, still covering his retreat and edging a step at a time toward the corner of the shack, but at the second step, with a swiftness which vindicated his name, the Bear Cat sprang.

The old miller shook his head, but made no outcry. He heard the thud of two bodies and the grunt driven from a chest by the impact of charging shoulders. He saw two figures go down together while a tongue of flame and a muffled roar broke belatedly from the mouth of the pistol.

Whether the bullet had taken effect or, if so, who was its victim, he could not at first distinguish. Two human beings, muscled like razor-backs were writhing and twisting in a smother of dust, their limbs clinched and their voices mingled in snarling and incoherent savagery. The mountain ethics of "fist and skull" impose no Queensbury restrictions. Tooth and knee, heel and knuckle may do their best—and worst.

But the pistol itself flew clear and the old miller picked it up, turning again to observe the result of the encounter.

The fighters had struggled up again to their feet and were locked in a bone-breaking embrace of hatred. For the moment the advantage seemed to rest with Webb, who was clutching Turner's head in the distressing chancery of his powerful right arm and doing his utmost to break the neck. Bear Cat's breathing was a hoarse and strangling agony, but his fists battered like unremitting flails against the ribs and kidneys of his antagonist. As they swayed and tottered their brogans were ploughing up the hard soil and, totally blinded by sweat and rage, they wavered perilously close to the edge of the huge rock—with its ten-foot drop to the mill race.

Even as Old Bud gave his warning cry, they went down together—and fell short of the brink, escaping that danger. Stacy writhed free from the neck-grip, and both came up again,

leaping into a fresh embrace of panthers, with eyes glaring insanely out of blood-smeared faces.

Then it all ended abruptly. Bear Cat wrenched himself free and sent a chance blow, but one behind which went all his weight and passion, to the other's mouth. The smitten head went back with a jerk. Webb reeled groggily for an instant, then crumpled, but before he had quite fallen Stacy, with an insenate fury, was dragging him to his feet and clutching at the throat which his fingers ached to strangle.

At that instant, the old miller seized his arms.

"Hold on thar, Bear Cat," he cried with his quavering voice. "He's already licked. You'll kill him ef ye hain't heedful."

"I *aims* ter kill him," panted the boy, casting off the interference of aged arms with the savagery of a dog whose fangs have been pried too soon from the throat of its victim.

But Bud Jason clung on, reiterating: "Fer shame, son! Thet hain't *yore* manner of conduct. Fer shame!"

Unsteadily, then, with a slow dawning of reason Bear Cat Stacy staggered back and leaned heavily against the wall of the tub-mill, breathing in sob-like gasps. His shirt was half torn from his body and for the first time the miller saw the ugly gash where a pistol bullet had bitten its grazing course along his left shoulder. Grime and blood stained him and for a while he stood gazing down on the collapsed figure at his feet—a figure that stirred gropingly.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "I'd jest about hev finished him, ef hit hadn't a-been fer *you,* Bud. I'm beholden ter ye. I reckon I was seein' red."

Together they lifted Ratler Webb and gave him water from the gourd that hung by the door. When he was able to stand, dourly resentful, baleful of eye but mute as to tongue, Bear Cat spoke briefly with the victor's authority:

"I aims ter keep thet pistol o' your'n fer a spell, Ratler. I don't hardly trust ye with hit jest yit. When ye wants hit, come by my house and ask fer hit."

The bully turned sullenly away. He spoke no word of farewell and offered no protest, but when he was out of sight the miller shook his head and his voice was troubled.

"Of course ye knows, son, thet he hain't never agoin' ter fergit hit? So long as ther two of ye lives ye've got ter keep on watchin' him."

Turner nodded. He was bathing his shoulder and spreading cobwebs on its grazed wound.

"I've done wasted a heap of time," he said irrelevantly. "An' hit's comin' on to rain, too. I reckon I'll be benighted afore I gets over ter ther still."

Starting away, he paused and turned shamefacedly back for a moment.

"Hit won't profit us none to norrate this matter abroad," he suggested. "I've got enough name already fer gittin' into ructions. Paw don't like hit none."

Gazing after the retreating figures the old man wagged his head and his expression was one of foreboding.

"Meanness an' grudge-nursin' kin bring on a heap of pestilence," he mused. "This Ratler will nurse his on ther bottle, an' he won't never wean hit—an' some day——! But it don't profit a feller ter borry trouble. These hills hes got enough misfortunes withouten thet."

Already twilight was settling over the valleys and the ridges were starkly grim as their color died to the neutrality of night, and the murk of a gathering storm.

CHAPTER IV

WITH a mutter of distant thunder in his ears, the young mountaineer plodded "slavishly" on under his load as night closed about him. The path twisted among heaped up bowlders where a misstep might mean broken bones and crawled through entanglements of fallen timber: of gnarled rhododendron and thorn-leaved holly. It wormed into dew-drenched thicknesses where branches lashed the burden-bearer's face with the sting of whips, and soon the colossal barriers began to echo with the storm roar of high places. The clouds were ripped with the blue-white blades of lightning. The rock walls of the ranges seemed quaking under the thunder's incessant cannonading, and the wind's shrieking mania. Then through the rent and buffeted timber-tops the rain burst in a lashing curtain of water as violent as a shot-shower.

Bear Cat Stacy, wet to the skin, with the steaming sweat of toil and fight turned into a marrow-pinching chill, cast about him for a place where he could protect his sack of meal until an abatement should come to the storm's violence.

As he sat under a dripping roof of shelving rock to which he had groped his way by the beacon of the lightning, a startled owl swept past him, almost brushing his face with its downy wings.

His wet clothes hung to his flesh with what seemed icy coldness. His shoulder throbbed with an abomination of pain and his bones ached with a dull wretchedness.

But after a time the wind and thunder dropped away to whimpering echoes. It was as if the hound pack of the furies had been whistled in, its hunt ended.

Turner rose and stamped his numbed feet. There was yet a long way to go before he arrived at the low-built shed, thatched with brush and screened behind a fallen hemlock top, where the Stacy still lay hidden.

At last he was there, with every muscle proclaiming its location by the outcry of sore tissues, and ahead of him lay the task of watching and feeding the fire under the mash kettle until dawn.

"Ye kin lay down when ye're ready, Lee," he said shortly to the stockily built man whom he was relieving from duty there. "I'll keep ther fire goin' an' call ye round about dawn."

Taking up the rifle to which he had fallen heir, as picket, he made his way from the sentinel's shelter to the still-house itself, stooping low, so that the waning fire might not throw his figure or face into relief. He piled a handful of wood under the kettle and crawled back into the timber.

The heavens were full of stars now: not the small light-points of skies arching over lowlands, but the gorgeous, great stars of the walled highlands.

His mother had done this sort of work to keep him alive, while his father was in prison! If he went on doing it, and if Blossom married him, they faced a future of the same drab decay! At the thought of that prospect he ground his chattering teeth and cursed under his breath.

The dull glow of the fire on a tin bucket and cup held his eyes with a spell of fascination. It was white liquor, raw, sweetish and freshly brewed. A gleam of craving flashed into his eyes: a craving that had come down through generations of grandsires—even though his own father had escaped it. Turner put out one hand, trembling with anticipation.

Here was warmth! Here was to be had for the taking a glow about the heart and a quickened current in the veins. Here was the stuff from which ease and waking dreams would come; release from his aching chill and dulness of spirit!

Bear Cat's eyes burned thirstily. He seemed only a vessel

of flesh overflowing with craving—with a torture of craving —an utter hell of craving! Then he drew back the eagerly extended hand.

"No," he said grimly. "Blossom air right. Ther stuff'll ruin me."

Resolutely he turned his back and stood facing the woods, listening to the drip of drenched leafage. Through raw hours he struggled with his appetite. Each time that he went back to throw fresh faggots on the fire he moved warily around the bucket, seeking to keep his eyes averted, but each time his gaze came back to it, and rested there thirstily.

Twice as his watch drew near its end he dipped the cup into the pail only to spill back the contents again, almost wildly, watching the thin trickle; and greedily sniffing its sweetish invitation of odor. Once the rim met his lips and the taste touched his tongue, but he violently spat it out and wiped his lips on the sleeve of his shirt.

"Hits ther devil's holy water," he murmured to himself. "Thet's what Brother Fulkerson says—an' I reckon he's right."

The evening star always reminded him of Blossom. H thought of it as her star, and upon it, as upon her own face, he kept his eyes fixed for encouragement as his spirit's resistance waned in the mounting tide of exhaustion. But when even that beacon was gone behind the mountain-top he felt the despair of one whose last ally has abandoned him to face travail unsupported.

He fell back on his dreams; dreams of what Lincoln had faced and conquered; of what he, too, might achieve. But now he could see them only dispiritedly as hollow shapes; misty things without hope or substance. That bucket now—a sip from it would rehabilitate them, give them at least the semblance of attainability. There lay relief from despair!

His mind flashed back to his father's rebuke and his answer: "Ye says I lay drunk. Thet's true an' hit's a shame-

ful thing fer a man ter admit. . . . But hit's a thing I've got ter fight out fer myself."

A great indignation against his father's misunderstanding possessed him. He must fight in his own way! Even Blossom had only asked him not to drink "too much."

When it needed only an hour more for the coming of dawn, his face grew darkly sullen.

"Hit's hell thet I've got ter spend my whole life a-brewin' ther stuff ergin my will—takin' chances of ther jail-house fer hit—an' yit I kain't have a drink when I'm wet ter ther bone," he growled.

Going as if drawn by a power stronger than his own volition, he moved balkingly yet with inevitable progress once more to the bucket. He half filled the cup—raised it—and this time gulped it down greedily and recklessly to the bottom.

Immediately his chilled veins began to glow with an ardent gratefulness. The stars seemed brighter and the little voices of the night became sweeter. The iron-bound gates of imagination swung wide to a pageantry of dreams, and as he crouched in the reeking underbrush, he half forgot his discontent.

Repeatedly he dipped and drained the cup. He was still on duty, but now he watched with a diminished vigilance. Gradually his senses became more blunt. The waking dreams were vaguer, too, and more absurd.

He still tended the fire under the kettle—but he laughed scornfully at the foolish need of keeping his face always in the shadow. Then suddenly he dropped down close to the dark earth, let the cup splash into the bucket, and thrust forward his rifle.

His ears had caught a sound which might have been a raccoon stirring in the brush—or a fox slipping covertly through the fallen hemlock top.

But there was no repetition, so he laughed again and with the first pallid hint of dawn on the ridges he shook the

shoulder of his sleeping companion. Then he himself sank down in the heavy torpor of exhaustion and drunkenness.

At the same time, because it would soon be light, the living creature which had made the sound began creeping away, and in doing so it avoided any other alarms. It was the figure of a man who had learned what he came there to determine.

When Lone Stacy plodded up to his still-house some hours later, he exchanged nods with the squat mountaineer whom he found waiting.

"Whar's Turner?" was his brief inquiry and the reply matched it in taciturnity. "In thar—a-layin' drunk."

The father went over and looked scowlingly down at the prostrate figure stretched awkwardly in open-mouthed stupor.

"I reckon," he announced succinctly, "thar hain't nothin' fer hit but ter suffer him ter sleep hit off."

With the toe of his boot Lone Stacy stirred the insensate body which sprawled there; all its youthful vitality stilled into grotesque stagnation. But when the hired man, Lee, was out of sight the bearded face twitched with a spasm of distress.

Its eyes traveled in a silent pathos from the sight of sagging jaw and hunched shoulders to the unresponsive majesty of the calm hills as if beseeching comfort there. In his only son's spirit had seemed to burn a fire of promise which even he could not understand. Was that fire to be quenched into the stale ashes of habitual drunkenness?

A groan rumbled in his throat.

Yet, had he remembered his Scriptures, Samson, the Mighty, had surrendered in his moment of weakness to the allurements and the shears of Delilah! Afterward, he had pulled down the pillars of the temple.

These hills that had stood upright in days when the Alps and the Himalayas had not yet stirred in conception, looked down placid, and unsympathetic. Perhaps the eternal spirit of the range was not ashamed of this erring child, asleep on its bosom. Perhaps, cognizant alike of tempest and calm, it

recognized this son's kinship with itself. The prophecy which dwells in the immemorial may have foreseen gathering powers of hurricane and might, which should some day make him rise above lesser summits. Possibly as he slept the great, silent voices were crooning a lullaby over offspring destined for mastery.

* * * *

When Ratler Webb had turned away from the tub-mill his brain was still half stunned from the jarring punishment of battle. He was thoroughly conscious only of deep chagrin and a gnawing hunger for reprisal.

From childhood he retained no tender memories.

There was no one upon whom he had a claim of blood, and neighborhood report had not let him forget that he was a woodscolt. In hill parlance a woodscolt signifies one whose birth has been sanctioned by no prior rites of matrimony.

Since he could remember he had existed only by virtue of the same predatory boldness which gives the lean razorback strength and innate craftiness to live.

Just now his whole abundant capacity for hatred was centered on Bear Cat Stacy, yet since Bear Cat's kinsmen peopled every creek and spring-branch of this country he could not be casually murdered.

Any word slipped to the ear of the revenue man might be traced back to him and after that he could no longer live among his native hills. Still, he reflected as he slowly rubbed his fingers along his uneven nose, time brings changes and chances. The possession of definite evidence against his enemy might some day bear fruit.

So Ratler did not ride home after his encounter at the mill. He took refuge instead in an abandoned cabin of which he knew, strategically located within a mile of the place where he had surmised the Stacy family were making illicit whiskey. While the storm raged, threatening to bring down the sagging

roof timbers about his ears, he sat before its dead and ruined hearth, entertaining bitter thoughts.

Between midnight and dawn he stepped over the broken threshold and began his reconnaissance. For two hours he crouched, wet and cramped, in the laurel near enough to throw a stone against the kettle of the primitive distillery—waiting for that moment of relaxed vigilance, when the figure that moved in the shadows should permit a ray from the fire to fall upon its features.

When dawn had almost come his vigil was rewarded and he had turned away again.

Blossom Fulkerson knew none of these things at noon of the day following the fight at the mill when, in the road, she encountered Lone Stacy making his way back to his house for his midday dinner, but as the old man stopped and nodded she read trouble in his eyes.

"Air ye worrited about somethin', Mr. Stacy?" she demanded, and for a little space the man stood hesitantly silent.

At last he hazarded, "Little gal, thar's a thing I'd like ter name ter ye. I reckon if anybody kin holp me hit mout be you."

The girl's eyes lighted with an instinctive sympathy—then shadowed with a premonition of what was coming.

"Is hit—about—Turner?"

The father nodded his head gravely. His eyes wore the harassed disquiet of a problem for which he knew no solution.

"Does ye mean thet he's—he's——" She broke off abruptly and Lone Stacy answered her with unrelieved bluntness.

"He's a-layin' up thar drunk ergin, an' he's got a gash on one shoulder thet's powder burned. I reckon he's been engagin' in some manner of ruction."

For a moment the girl did not speak, but her cheeks paled and tears swam abruptly in her eyes. She raised one hand and brushed them fiercely away.

She had awakened this morning with a new and unac-

countable happiness in her heart. In all the lilt and sparkle of the world and all the tunefulness of the young summer there had seemed a direct message to herself. In her memory she had been hearing afresh the crude but impassioned eloquence with which the boy had talked to her yesterday. Now he lay up there at the distillery in the heavy sleep of the drunkard.

"Ther boy's all I've got," announced Lone Stacy with an unaccustomed break in his voice. "I reckon mebby ef I hadn't been so harsh I mout hev more influence with him." Then he turned abruptly on his heel and trudged on.

Blossom Fulkerson slipped into the woods and came to a sun-flecked amphitheater of rock and rhododendron where the ferns grew lush and tall, by the sparkle of water. There she sank down and covered her face with her hands. Her sobs shook her for a while, and then washing the tears away, she knelt and prayed with a passionate simplicity.

Sometimes she lifted a pale face and her lips twisted themselves pathetically in the earnestness of her prayer.

The Almighty to Whom she made her plea, and Who knew everything, must know, even as she knew, that Turner Stacy was not like those rowdy youths who habitually disgraced the hills. That occasional smile which lurked with its inherent sweetness under his affected sullenness must mean *something*.

Turner had always been her willing vassal, and "sometime" she had supposed, though hitherto that had always seemed a vaguely distant matter like the purple haze on the horizon, they would be avowed sweethearts.

Yesterday, though, as she walked back from the meeting on the ridge it had seemed as if she had spent a moment in that languourous land where the far mists drouse,—and yet the glamour had not faded. She hadn't sought to analyze then, she had only felt a new thrill in her heart as she instinctively broke clusters of pink-hearted bloom from the laurel.

She left the woods after a while and as she came out

again to the high road, she heard a voice raised in the high-pitched, almost falsetto, minors of mountain minstrelsy.

It was not a pleasing voice, nor was the ballad a cheery one. As for the singer himself, the twisting of the way still concealed him from view, so that his song proclaimed him like a herald in advance.

"He stobbed her to ther heart an' she fell with a groan.
He threw a leetle dirt *ov*-er her, an' started fer home,"

wailed the dolorous voice of the traveler. There was a splashing of hoofs in shallow water, then a continuation

"His debt ter ther devil now William must pay,
Fer he fell down an' died afore break of day."

Thus announced, a mule plodded shortly into sight, and upon his back, perching sidewise, sat a tow-headed lout of a boy with staring, vacant eyes and a mouth which hung open, even when he desisted from song.

With an access of callow diffidence he halted his mount at sight of Blossom, staring with a nod and a bashful "Howdy."

"Howdy, Leander," accosted the girl. "How's all your folks?"

Leander White, of Crowfoot Branch, aged fifteen, gulped twice with prodigious and spasmodic play of his adam's apple, before he eventually commanded voice to reply:

"They're all well. . . . I'm obleeged . . . ter ye." Then, however, reassured by the cordial smile on the lips of Blossom Fulkerson, his power of speech and his hunger for gossip returned to him in unison.

"But old Aunt Lucy Hutton, over acrost ther branch, she fell down yistiddy an' broke a bone inside of her, though."

"Did she?" demanded the girl, readily sympathetic, and Leander, thus given sanction as a purveyor of tidings, nodded

and gathered confidence. "Huh-huh, an' Revenuers raided Joe Simmons's still-house on ther headwaters of Skinflint an' cyarried off a *beau*tiful piece o' copper—atter they'd punched hit full o' holes."

"Revenuers!" Into the girl's voice now came a note of anxiety.

"Huh-huh, revenuers. Folks says they're gittin' bodaciously pesky these days."

"Ye ain't—ye ain't seen none of 'em yourself, have ye, Leander?" The question came a bit breathlessly and the boy forgot his bashfulness as he expanded with the importance of his traveler's tales.

"Not to know 'em fer sich," he admitted, "but I met up with a furriner a few leagues back along ther highway. He was broguein' along mighty brash on his own two feet. La! But he was an elegant party ter be a-ridin' on shoe-leather, though!"

"What manner of furriner was he, Leander?" demanded Blossom with a clutch of fright at her heart, but the boy shook his head stupidly.

"Wa'al he was jest a feller from down below. Ter tell hit proper, I didn't hev much speech with him. We jest met an' made our manners an' went our ways. He 'lowed ter go ter Lone Stacy's house."

"Lone Stacy's house," echoed the girl faintly.

"Reckon' I'll be a-ridin' on," drawled the young horseman nonchalantly. "Reckon I've done told ye all ther tidings I knows."

Blossom stood, for a while, rooted where he had left her, listening to the splash of the mule's feet along the creek. If a prying eye should discover the Stacy still today it would find not only "a beautiful piece of copper" but Bear Cat lying there incapacitated and helpless!

Her heart missed its beat at the thought. The hills seemed to close in on her stiflingly with all their age-old oppression

of fears and impending tragedies, and she sat down by the roadside to think it out. What should she do?

After a while she saw the tall figure of the elder Stacy climbing the mountainside, but he was taking a short cut—and would not come within hailing distance. Her eye, trained to read indications, noted that a rifle swung in his right hand.

Bitterly she had been taught by her father to resent the illicit business to which Turner's service was grudgingly given. But above all ethical hatred of law-breaking rose the very present danger to Turner himself. Laws were abstract things and Turner was Turner!

There was only one answer. She must watch and, if need arose, give warning.

Just where the brook that trickled down from the still gushed out to the creek and the road which followed its course, lay a steeply sloping field of young corn. Along its back grew rows of "shuckybeans," and here Blossom took her station for her self-appointed task of sentry duty.

CHAPTER V

JERRY HENDERSON had lost his way.

Aching muscles protested the extra miles because back there at Marlin Town he had been advised to cross Cedar Mountain on foot.

"Unless they suspicions ye, 'most any man'll contrive ter take ye in an' enjoy ye somehow," his counselors had pointed out. "But thar's heaps of them pore fam'lies over thar thet hain't got feed fer a ridin' critter noways."

Now Cedar Mountain is not, as its name mendaciously implies, a single peak but a chain that crawls, zig-zag as herringbone, for more than a hundred miles with few crossings which wheels can follow.

It is a wall twenty-five hundred feet high, separating the world from "back of beyond." Having scaled it since breakfast, Jerry Henderson was tired.

He was tanned and toughened like saddle-leather. He was broad of shoulder, narrow of thigh, and possessed of a good, resolute brow and a straight-cut jaw. His eyes were keen with intelligence and sufficiently cool with boldness.

Arriving at a narrow thread of clear water which came singing out at the edge of a corn-field, his eyes lighted with satisfaction. Tilled ground presumably denoted the proximity of a human habitation where questions could be answered.

So he stood, searching the forested landscape for a thread of smoke or a roof, and as he did so he perceived a movement at the edge of the field where the stalks had grown higher than the average and merged with the confusion of the thicket.

Jerry turned and began making his way along the edge of the patch, respecting the corn rows by holding close to the tangle at the margin. Then suddenly with a rustling of the shrubbery as startling as the sound with which a covey of

quail rises from nowhere, a figure stepped into sight and the stranger halted in an astonishment which, had Blossom Fulkerson realized it, was the purest form of flattery.

He had seen many women and girls working in the fields as he had come along the way and most of them had been heavy of feature and slovenly of dress. Here was one who might have been the spirit of the hills themselves in bloom; one who suggested kinship with the free skies and the sunlit foliage.

With frank delight in the astonishing vision, Jerry Henderson stood there, his feet well apart, his pack still on his shoulders and his lips parted in a smile of greeting and friendliness.

"Howdy," he said, but the girl remained motionless, vouchsafing no response.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," he volunteered easily, using the vernacular of the hills, "and I've strayed off my course. I was aiming to go to Lone Stacy's dwelling-house."

Still she remained statuesque and voiceless, so the man went on: "Can you set me right? There seems to be a sort of a path here. Does it lead anywhere in particular?"

He took a step nearer and eased his pack to the ground among the briars of the blackberry bushes.

Abruptly, as if to bar his threatened progress, Blossom moved a little to the side, obstructing the path. Into her eyes leaped a flame of Amazonian hostility and her hands clenched themselves tautly at her sides. Her lips parted and from her throat came a long, mellow cry not unlike the yodle of the Tyrol. It echoed through the timber and died away—and again she stood confronting him—wordless!

"I didn't mean to startle you," he declared reassuringly, "I only wanted information."

Again the far-carrying but musical shout was sent through the quiet of the forest—his only answer.

"Since you won't answer my questions," said Jerry Hen-

derson, irritated into capriciousness, "I think I'll see for myself where this trail leads."

Instantly, then, she planted herself before him, with a violently heaving bosom and a wrathful quivering of her delicate nostrils. Her challenge broke tensely from her lips with a note of unyielding defiance.

"Ye can't pass hyar!"

"So you *can* talk, after all," he observed coolly. "It's a help to learn that much at all events."

He had chanced on a path, he realized, which some moonshiner preferred keeping closed and the girl had been stationed there as a human declaration, "no thoroughfare."

Still he stood where he was and presently he had the result of his waiting.

A deep, masculine voice, unmistakable in the peremptoriness of its command, sounded from the massed tangle of the hillside. It expressed itself in the single word "Begone!" and Henderson was not fool enough to search the underbrush for an identifying glimpse of his challenger.

"My name is Jerry Henderson and I was seeking to be shown my way," he said quietly, keeping his eyes, as he spoke, studiously on the face of the girl.

"Begone! I'm a-warnin' ye fa'r. Begone!"

The wayfarer shrugged his shoulders. Debate seemed impracticable, but his annoyance was not lessened as he recognized in the clear eyes of the young woman a half-suppressed mockery of scorn and triumph.

Henderson stooped and hefted his pack again to his shoulders, adjusting it deliberately. If it must be retreat, he wished at least to retire with the honors of war. The girl's expression had piqued him into irascibility.

"I'd heard tell that folks hereabouts were civil to strangers," he announced bluntly. "And I don't give a damn about whatever secret you're bent on hiding from me."

Then he turned on his heel and started, not rapidly but with a leisurely stride to the road. He seemed to feel the

eyes of the girl following him as he went, and his spirit of resentment prompted an act of mild bravado as he halted by the rotten line of fence and unhurriedly tightened the lace of a boot.

"Hasten!" barked the warning voice from the laurel, but Henderson did not hasten. He acknowledged the disquieting surmise of a rifle trained on him from the dense cover, but he neither looked back nor altered his pace. Then he heard a gun bark from the shrubbery and a bullet zip as it found its billet in a tree trunk above his head, but that he had expected. It was merely a demonstration in warning—not an attempt on his life. As long as he kept on his way, he believed hostilities would go no further.

Without venturing to use his eyes, he let his ears do their best, and a satirical smile came to his lips as he heard a low, half-smothered scream of fright break from the lips of the girl whom he could no longer see.

And, had he been able to study the golden-brown eyes just then, he would have been even more compensated, for into them crept a slow light of admiration and astonished interest.

"He ain't nobody's coward anyways," she murmured as the figure of the unknown man swung out of sight around the bend, and some thought of the same sort passed through the mind of the elderly man in the thicket, bringing a grim but not an altogether humorless smile to his lips.

"Wa'al, I run him off," he mused, "but I didn't hardly run him no-ways *hard!*"

Jerry Henderson had borne credentials from Uncle Israel Calvert who kept a store on Big Ivy, and he had been everywhere told that once Uncle Billy had viséd his passports, he would need no further safe-conduct.

In the encounter at the cornfield there had been no opportunity to show that bill of health and it was only after an hour spent in walking the wrong way, that its possessor met the next person to whom he could put questions. Then he learned that "Lone Stacy dwelt in a sizeable house over

on Little Slippery,"—but that he had strayed so far from the true course that now he must climb a mountain or take a detour and that in either event he would have to hasten to arrive there before nightfall.

So the shadows were lengthening when he turned into the course of what must be "Little Slippery"—and came face to face with two men of generous stature, one elderly and the other youthful. He noted that the older of these men carried a rifle on his shoulder and was conscious of a piercing scrutiny from both pairs of eyes.

"I'm seeking Lone Stacy," began Henderson, and the older face darkened into a momentary scowl of animosity, with the coming of the curt reply:

"Thet's my name."

The traveler gave a violent start of astonishment. It was a deep-chested voice which, once heard, was not to be confused with other voices, and Jerry Henderson had heard it not many hours before raised in stentorian warning from the depth of the thickets. But promptly he recovered his poise and smiled.

"I have a piece of paper here," he said, "from Uncle Israel Calvert. He said that if he vouched for me you would be satisfied."

As Lone Stacy accepted the proffered note with his left hand he passed his rifle to the younger man with his right, and even then he held the sheet unopened for a space while his serious gaze swept the stranger slowly from head to foot in challenging appraisal.

He read slowly, with the knitted brows of the unscholastic, and as he did so the youth kept his eye on Henderson's face—and his finger on the trigger.

Having seen the boy's face, Henderson found it hard to shift his glance elsewhere. He had encountered many mountain faces that were sinister and vindictive—almost malign, but it was not the unyielding challenge which arrested him

now. It was something far more individual and impressive. There are eyes that reflect light with the quicksilver responsiveness of mirrors. There are others, though more rare, which shine from an inner fire.

Bear Cat Stacy's held the golden, unresting flame that one encounters in the tawny iris of a captive lion or eagle. Such eyes in a human face mean something and it is something which leads their possessor to the gallows or the throne. They are heralds of a spirit untameable and invincible; of the will to rend or rebuild.

Henderson found himself thinking of volcanoes which are latent but not extinct. It was a first glimpse, but if he never again saw this boy, who stood there measuring him with cool deliberation, he would always remember him as one remembers the few instantly convincing personalities one has brushed in walking through life.

But when Lone Stacy had finished his perusal, the nod of his head was an assurance of dissipated doubt. There was even a grave sort of courtesy in his manner now, as he announced:

"Thet's good enough fer me. If Uncle Israel vouches fer ye, ye're welcome. He says hyar 'ther bearer is trustworthy' —but he don't say who ye air. Ye said yore name war Jerry Henderson, didn't ye?"

"That *is* my name," assented the newcomer, once more astonished. "But I didn't realize I'd told it yet."

With an outright scorn for subterfuge the older man replied, "I reckon thar hain't no profit in a-beatin' ther devil round ther stump. You've heered my voice afore—an' I've seed yore face. Ye tole me yore name back thar—in ther la'rel, didn't ye?"

Henderson bowed. "I *did* recognize your voice, but I didn't aim to speak of it—unless you did."

"When I says that I trusts a man," the moonshiner spoke with an unambiguous quietness of force, "I means what I says an' takes my chances accordin'. Ef a man betrays my confi-

dence—" he paused just an instant then added pointedly—"he takes *his* chances. What did ye 'low yore business war, hyarabouts, Mr. Henderson?"

"I mean to explain that to you in due time, Mr. Stacy, but just now it takes fewer words to say what's *not* my business."

"Wall then, what *hain't* yore business?"

"Other people's business."

"Wa'al so far as hit goes thet's straight talk. I favors outright speech myself an' ye don't seem none mealy-mouthed. Ye talks right fer yoreself—like a mountain man."

"You see," said Henderson calmly, "I *am* a mountain man even if I've dwelt down below for some years."

"You—a mountain man?" echoed the bearded giant in bewilderment and the visitor nodded.

"Ever hear of Torment Henderson?" he inquired.

"Colonel Torment Henderson! Why, hell's fiddle, man, my daddy sarved under him in ther war over slavery! I was raised upon stories of how he tuck thet thar name of 'Torment' in battle."

"He was my grandpap," the stranger announced, dropping easily into the phrases of the country.

"Mr. Henderson," said the old man, drawing himself up a trifle straighter, "we're pore folks, but we're proud ter hev ye enjoy what little we've got. This hyar's my son, Turner Stacy."

Then Bear Cat spoke for the first time. "I reckon ye be leg-weary, Mr. Henderson. I'll fotch yore contraptions ter ther house."

There remained to the splendidly resilient powers of Bear Cat's physical endowment no trace of last night's debauch except that invisible aftermath of desperate chagrin and mortification. As he lifted the pack which Henderson had put down something like admiring wonderment awoke in him. Here was a man born like himself in the hills, reared in crude

places, who yet bore himself with the air of one familiar with the world, and who spoke with the fluency of education.

As the wearied traveler trudged along with his two hosts, he had glowing before his eyes the final fires of sunset over hills that grew awesomely somber and majestic under the radiance of gold and ash of rose. Then they reached a gate, where a horse stood hitched, and before them bulked the dark shape of a house whose open door was a yellow slab of lamplight.

From the porch as they came up, rose a gray figure in the neutrality of the dying light; a man with a patriarchal beard that fell over his breast and an upper lip clean shaven, like a Mormon elder. Even in that dimness a rude dignity seemed inherent to this man and as Henderson glanced at him he heard Lone Stacy declaring, "Brother Fulkerson, ye're welcome. This hyar is Mr. Henderson." Then turning to the guest, the householder explained. "Brother Fulkerson air ther preacher of God's Word hyarabouts. He's a friend ter every Christian an' a mighty wrastler with sin."

As the stranger acknowledged this presentation he glanced up and, standing in the light from the door, found himself face to face with yet another figure; the figure of a girl who was silhouetted there in profile, for the moment seemingly frozen motionless by astonishment. Her face was flooded with the pinkness of a deep blush, and her slender beauty was as undeniable as an axiom.

Lone Stacy turned with an amused laugh. "An' this, Mr. Henderson," he went on, "air Brother Fulkerson's gal, Blossom. I reckon ye two hev met afore—albeit ye didn't, in a way of speakin', make yore manners ther fust time."

Blossom bowed, then she laughed shyly but with a delicious quality of music in her voice.

"I reckon ye 'lowed I didn't know nothin'—I mean anything—about manners, Mr. Henderson," she confessed and the man hastily assured her:

"I 'lowed that you were splendidly loyal—to somebody."

As he spoke he saw Bear Cat at his elbow, his eyes fixed on the girl with a wordless appeal of contrition and devotion, and he thought he understood.

"Howdy, Blossom," murmured Turner, and the girl's chin came up. Her voice seemed to excommunicate him as she replied briefly: "Howdy, Turner."

This was a lover's quarrel, surmised Henderson and discreetly he turned again to the host, but, even so, he saw Turner step swiftly forward and raise his hands. His lips were parted and his eyes full of supplication, but he did not speak. He only let his arms fall and turned away with a face of stricken misery.

Blossom knew about last night, reflected Bear Cat. He was, as he deserved to be, in disgrace.

Then as the girl stood looking off into the gathering darkness her own face filled wistfully with pain and the boy, dropping to a seat on the floor of the porch, watched her covertly with sidewise glances.

"Blossom met me down ther road," observed the minister, "an' named ter me thet she hed——" He paused, casting a dubious glance at the stranger, and Lone Stacy interrupted: "She named ter ye thet she stood guard at ther still an' warned Mr. Henderson off?"

Brother Fulkerson nodded gravely. "I was a little mite troubled in my mind lest she'd put herself in jeopardy of the law. Thet's why I lighted down an' hitched hyar: ter hev speech with ye."

"Ye needn't worrit yoreself none, Brother Fulkerson," reassured the host. "Mr. Henderson comes vouched fer by Uncle Israel."

The preacher sat for a space silent and when he next spoke it was still with a remnant of misgiving in his tone.

"I don't aim to go about crossin' good men and a-cavilin' with thar opinions," he began apologetically. "Like as not

heaps of 'em air godlier men than me, but I holds it to be my duty to speak out free." Again he paused and cast a questioning glance at his host as though in deference to the hospitality of the roof, and the tall mountaineer, standing beside the post of his porch, nodded assent with equal gravity.

"Talk right fer yoreself, Brother Fulkerson. I don't never aim ter muzzle no man's speech."

"Waal, this day I've rid some twenty miles acrost high ridges and down inter shadowy valleys. I've done traversed some places thet war powerful wild an' laurely. Wharsoever God's work calls me, I'm obleeged ter go, but I raised my voice in song as I fared along amongst them thickets, lest some man thet I couldn't see; some man a-layin' on watch, mout suspicion I was seekin' ter discover somethin' he aimed ter keep hid—jest as ye suspicioned Mr. Henderson, hyar."

Lone Stacy stroked his beard.

"I reckon thet war ther wisest way, Brother Fulkerson, unless every man over thar knowed ye."

"I reckon God likes ther songs of his birds better," declared the preacher, "then ther song of a man thet *hes* ter sing ter protect his own life. I reckon no country won't ever prosper mightily, whilst hit's a land of hidin' out with rifle-guns in ther laurel."

There was no wrath in the eyes of the host as he listened to his guest's indictment or the voice of thrilling earnestness in which it was delivered. He only raised one hand and pointed upward where a mighty shoulder of mountain rose hulking through the twilight. Near its top one could just make out the thread-like whiteness of a new fence line.

"Yonder's my corn patch," he said. "When I cl'ared hit an' grubbed hit out my neighbors all came ter ther workin' an' amongst us we toiled thar from sun-up twell one o'clock at night—daylight an' moonlight. On thet patch I kin raise me two or three master crops o' corn an' atter *thet* hit won't hardly raise rag weeds! A bushel o' thet corn, sledded over

ter ther nighest store fotches in mebby forty cents. But thar's two gallons of licker in hit an' *thet's* wuth money. Who's a-goin' ter deny me ther rightful license ter do hit?"

"Ther Law denies ye," replied the preacher gravely, but without acerbity.

"Thar's things thet's erginst ther law," announced the old man with a swift gathering of fierceness in his tone, "an' thar's things thet's *above* ther law. A criminal is a man thet's done befouled his own self-respect. I hain't never done thet an' I hain't no criminal. What do *you* think, Mr. Henderson?"

Henderson had no wish to be drawn, so soon, into any conflict of local opinion, yet he realized that a candid reply was expected.

"My opinion is that of theory only," he responded seriously. "But I agree with Brother Fulkerson. A community with secrets to hide is a hermit community—and one of the strangers that is frightened away—is Prosperity."

Bear Cat Stacy, brooding silently in his place, looked suddenly up. Hitherto he had seen only the sweet wistfulness of Blossom's eyes. Now he remembered the words of the old miller.

"Some day a mountain man will rise up as steadfast as the hills he sprung from—an' he'll change hit all like ther sun changes fog!" Perhaps Turner Stacy was ripe for hero-worship.

Over the mountain top appeared the beacon of the evening star—luminous but pale. As if saluting it the timber became wistful with the call of whippoorwills and fireflies began to flit against the sooty curtain of night.

Something stirred in the boy, as though the freshening breeze brought the new message of an awakening. Here was the talk of wise men, concurring with the voices of his dreams! But at that moment his mother appeared in the doorway and announced

"You men kin come in an' *eat,* now."

CHAPTER VI

IN FORMER days an Appalachian tavern was a "quarter-house"; a hostelry where one paid a quarter for one's bed and a quarter, each, for meals. Now the term has fallen into such disuse as to be no longer generic, but locally it survived with a meaning both specific and malodorous. The press of Kentucky and Virginia had used it often, coupled with lurid stories of blood-lettings and orgies; linking with it always the name of its proprietor, Kinnard Towers.

How could such things go on in the twentieth century? questioned the readers of these news columns, forgetting that this ramparted isolation lives not in the twentieth century but still in the eighteenth; that its people who have never seen salt water still sing the ballads of Walter Raleigh's sea-rovers, and that from their lips still fall, warm with every-day usage, the colloquialisms of Chaucer and of Piers the Ploughman.

The Quarterhouse stood in a cleft where the mountains had been riven. Its front door opened into Virginia and its rear door gave into Kentucky. Across the puncheon floor was humorously painted a stripe of whitewash, as constantly renewed as the markings of a well-kept tennis court—and that line was a state boundary.

Hither flocked refugees from the justice of two states, and if a suddenly materializing sheriff confronted his quarry in the room where each day and each night foregathered the wildest spirits of a wild land, the hounded culprit had only to cross that white line and stand upon his lawful demand for extradition papers. Here, therefore, the hunted foxes of the law ran to ground. The man who presided as proprietor was a power to be feared, admired, hated as individual circum-

stance dictated, but in any case one whose wrath was not to be advisedly stirred.

He had found it possible to become wealthy in a land where such achievement involves battening on poverty. Cruel—suave; predatory—charitable, he had taken life by his own hand and that of the hireling, but also he had, in famine-times, succored the poor.

He had, in short, awed local courts and intimidated juries of the vicinage until he seemed beyond the law, and until office-holders wore his collar.

Kinnard Towers was floridly blond of coloring, mild of eye and urbanely soft-spoken of voice.

Once, almost two decades ago, while the feud was still eruptive, it had seemed advisable to him to have Lone Stacy done to death, and to that end he had bargained with Black Tom Carmichael.

Black Tom had been provided with a double-barreled gun, loaded with buckshot, and placed in a thicket which, at the appointed hour, the intended victim must pass. But it had chanced that fate intervened. On that day Lone Stacy had carried in his arms his baby son, Turner Stacy, and, seeing the child, Black Tom had faltered.

Later in the seclusion of a room over the Quarterhouse, the employer had wrathfully taken his churl to task.

"Wa'al, why didn't ye git him?" was the truculent interrogation. "He passed by close enough fer ye ter hit him with a rock."

"He was totin' his baby," apologized the designated assassin shamefacedly, yet with a sullen obstinacy. "I was only hired ter kill a growed-up man. Ef ye'd a-give me a rifle-gun like I asked ye 'stid of a scatter-gun I could've got him through his damned head an' not harmed ther child none. Thet's why I held my hand."

Kinnard Towers had scornfully questioned: "What makes ye so tormentin' mincy erbout ther kid? Don't ye know full

well thet when he grows up we'll have ter git *him,* too? Howsoever next time I'll give ye a rifle-gun."

Like all unlettered folk the mountaineer is deeply superstitious and prone to believe in portents and wonders. Often, though he can never be brought to confess it he gives credence to tales of sorcery and witchcraft.

Turner Stacy was from his birth a "survigrous" child, and he was born on the day of the eclipse. As he came into the world the sun was darkened. Immediately after that a sudden tempest broke which tore the forests to tatters, awoke quiet brooks to swirling torrents, unroofed houses and took its toll of human life. Even in after years when men spoke of the "big storm" they always alluded to *that* one.

An old crone who was accounted able to read fortunes and work charms announced that Turner Stacy came into life on the wings of that storm, and that the sun darkened its face because his birth savored of the supernatural. This being so, she said, he was immune from any harm of man's devising. Her absurd story was told and retold around many a smoky cabin hearth, and there were those who accorded it an unconfessed credence.

Later Black Tom was given a rifle and again stationed in ambush. Again Lone Stacy, favored by chance, carried his baby son in his arms. Black Tom, whose conscience had never before impeded his action, continued to gaze over his gun-sights—without pressing the trigger.

Towers was furious, but Carmichael could only shake his head in a frightened bewilderment, as if he had seen a ghost.

"Ther brat looked at me jest as I was about to fire," he protested. "His eyes didn't look like a human bein's. He hain't no baby—he was born a man—or somethin' more then a man."

As affairs developed, the truce was arranged soon afterward, and also the marked man's death became unnecessary, because he was safe in prison on a charge of moonshining.

Neither Lone Stacy nor his son had ever known of this occurrence, and now the Stacys and the Towers met on the road and "made their manners" without gun-play.

But to Kinnard Towers local happenings remained vital and, for all his crudity, few things of topical interest occurred of which he was not duly apprised.

Into his dwelling place came one day the Honorable Abraham Towers, his nephew, who sat in the state Legislature at Frankfort. The two were closeted together for an hour and as the nephew emerged, at the end of the interview, Kinnard walked with him to the hitching-post where the visitor's horse stood tethered.

"I'm obleeged ter ye, Abe," he said graciously. "When this man Henderson gits hyar, I'll make hit a point ter hev casual speech with him. I aims ter l'arn his business, an' ef what ye suspicions air true, he'll have dealin's with me—or else he won't hardly succeed."

So it happened logically enough that on the evening of Jerry's arrival, Kinnard Towers mounted and started out over the hill trails. He rode, as he always did when he went far abroad, under armed escort since tyrants are never secure. Four rifle-equipped vassals accompanied him; two riding as advance guard and two protecting the rear.

Kinnard's destination was the house of Lone Stacy on Little Slippery, a house whose threshold he could not, in the old days, have crossed without blood-letting; but these were the days of peace.

Arriving, he did not go direct to the door and knock, but discreetly halting in the highway, lifted his voice and shouted aloud, "Halloo! I'm Kinnard Towers an' I'm a-comin' in."

The door was thrown promptly open and Lone Stacy appeared, framed between threshold and lintel, holding a lamp aloft and offering welcome.

"Gentlemen," said the host in a matter-of-fact voice, "ef you'll excuse me, I'll rest yore guns."

Then in observance of a quaint and ancient ceremonial, each armed guardian passed in, surrendering his rifle at the threshold. In retarded Appalachia so runs the rule. To fail in its fulfilment is to express distrust for the honesty and ability of the householder to protect his guests, and such an implication constitutes a grave discourtesy.

Inside a fire roared on the hearth, for even in June, the mountain nights are raw.

Henderson, watching the small cavalcade troop in, smiled inwardly. He was not unmindful of the identity or the power of this modern baron, and he was not without suspicion that he himself was the cause of the visit.

"I chanced ter be farin' by, Lone," Kinnard Towers enlightened his host easily, "an' I 'lowed I'd light down an' rest a little spell."

"Ye're welcome," was the simple reply. "Draw up ter ther fire an' set ye a cheer."

The talk lingered for a space on neighborhood topics, but the host had found time, between hearing the shout outside and replying to it, to say in a low voice to his guest: "I reckon atter Kinnard Towers comes in we won't talk no more erbout *my* still—jest stills in gin'ral," and that caution was religiously observed.

The kitchen tasks had been finished now and while the men sat close to the smoking hearth the faces of the women looked on from the shadowed corners of the room, where they sat half obscured upon the huge four-poster beds.

The man who had crossed Cedar Mountain lighted his pipe from the bed of coals and then, straightening up, he stood on the hearth where his eyes could take in the whole semicircle of listening faces. They were eyes that, for all their seeming of a theorist's engrossment, missed little.

This house might have been a pioneer abode of two hundred years ago, standing unamended by the whole swelling tide of modernity that had passed it by untouched.

The leaping blaze glittered on the metal of polished rifles stacked in a corner, and on two others hanging against the smoke-dimmed logs of the walls. Red pods of peppers and brown leaves of tobacco were strung along the rafters. Hardly defined of shape against one shadowy wall, stood a spinning wheel.

Henderson knew that the room was pregnant with the conflict of human elements. He realized that he himself faced possibilities which made his mission here a thing of delicate manipulation; even of personal danger.

The blond man with the heavy neck, who sat contemplatively chewing at the stem of an unlighted pipe, listened in silence. He hardly seemed interested, but Henderson recognized him for the sponsor and beneficiary of lawlessness. He more than any other would be the logical foe to a new order which brought the law in its wake—and the law's reckonings.

Near to the enemy whom he had heretofore faced in pitched battle, sat old Lone Stacy, his brogans kicked off and his bare feet thrust out to the warmth; bearded, shrewd of eye, a professed lover of the law, asking only the exemption of his illicit still. He, too, in the feud days had wielded power, but had sought in the main to wield it for peace.

And there, showing no disposition to draw aside the skirts of his raiment in disgust, sat the preacher of the hills whose strength lay in his ability to reconcile antagonisms, while yet he stood staunch, abating nothing of self-sacrificial effort. It was almost as though church and crown and commoner were gathered in informal conclave.

But luminous, like fixed stars, gleamed two other pairs of eyes. As he realized them, Henderson straightened up with such a thrill as comes from a vision. Here were the eyes of builders of the future—agleam as they looked on the present! Blossom's were wide and enthralled and Turner Stacy's burned as might those of a young crusader hearing from the lips of old and seasoned knights recitals of the wars of the Sepulchre.

Bear Cat Stacy saw in this stranger the prophet bearing messages for which he had longed—and waited almost without hope. But Kinnard Towers saw in him a dangerous and unsettling agitator.

"You said," declared Henderson, when the theme had swung back again to economic discussion, "that your cornfield was good for a few crops and then the rains would wash it bare, yet as I came along the road I saw an out-cropping vein of coal that reached above my head, and on each side of me were magnificent stretches of timber that the world needs and that is growing scarce."

"Much profit thet does me," Lone Stacy laughed dryly. "Down at Uncle Israel's store thar's a dollar bill thet looks like hit's a-layin' on ther counter—but when ye aims to pick hit up ye discarns thet hit's pasted under ther glass. Thet coal an' timber of mine air pasted ter ther wrong side of Cedar Mounting."

"And why? Because there are few roads and fewer schools. It's less the cost and difficulties of building wagon roads than something else that stands in the way. It's the laurel."

"The laurel?" repeated Lone Stacy, but the preacher nodded comprehendingly, and the visitor went on:

"Yes. The laurel. I've been in Central American jungles where men died of fever because the thick growth held and bred the miasma. Here the laurel holds a spirit of concealment. If there wasn't a bush in all these hills big enough to hide a man, the country would be thrown open to the markets of the world. It's the spirit of hiding—that locks life in and keeps it poor."

"I presume ye means on account of ther blockade licker," replied the host, "but thet don't tech ther root of ther matter. How erbout ther fields thet stand on end; fields thet kain't be plowed an' thet ther rains brings down on yore head, leavin' nuthin 'thar but ther rock?"

Henderson had the power of convincing words, abetted by a persuasive quality of voice. As a mountain man he preached his faith in the future of the hills. He spoke of the vineyards of Madeira where slopes as incorrigibly steep as these were redeemed by terracing. He talked of other lands that were being exhausted of resources and turning greedy eyes upon the untapped wealth of the Cumberlands. He painted the picture glowingly and fervently, and Turner Stacy, listening, bent forward with a new fire in his eyes: a fire which Kinnard Towers did not fail to mark.

"When ther railroad taps us," interpolated Lone Stacy, in a pause, "mebby we kin manage ter live. Some says ther road aims ter cross Cedar Mounting."

"Don't deceive yourself with false hopes," warned the visitor. "This change must be brought about from inside—not outside. The coming of the railroad lies a decade or two away. I've investigated that question pretty thoroughly and I know. The coal-fields are so large that railroads can still, for a long time to come, choose the less expensive routes. Cedar Mountain balks them for the present. It will probably balk them for the length of our lives—but this country can progress without waiting for that."

"So ye thinks thet even without no railroad this God-forsaken land kin still prosper somehow?" inquired the host skeptically, and the visitor answered promptly:

"I do. I am so convinced of it that I'm here to buy property—to invest all I have and all my mother and sisters have. I think that by introducing modern methods of intensive farming, I can make it pay a fair return in my own time—and when I die I'll leave property that will ultimately enrich the younger generations. I *don't* think it can make *me* rich in my lifetime—but *some* day it's a certainty of millions."

"Why don't ye buy yoreself property whar ther railroad will come in yore own day, then? Wouldn't thet pay ye better?"

The suggestion was the first contribution to the conversation that had come from Kinnard Towers, and it was proffered in a voice almost urbane of tone.

Henderson turned toward him.

"That's a straight question and I'll answer it straight. To buy as much property as I want along a possible railway line would cost too much money. I'm gambling, not on the present but on the future. I come here because I know the railroad is *not* coming and for that reason prices will be moderate."

As he made this explanation the newcomer was watching the face of his questioner almost eagerly. What he read there might spell the success or failure of his plans. Any enterprise across which Kinnard Towers stamped the word "prohibited" was an enterprise doomed to great vicissitude in a land where his word was often above the law.

But the blond and florid man granted him the satisfaction of no reply. He gazed pensively at the logs crackling on the hearth and his features were as inscrutably blank as those of the Sphinx.

After a moment Towers did speak, but it was to his host and on another topic.

"Lone," he said, "thet firewood of yourn's right green an' sappy, hain't it? Hit pops like ther fo'th of July."

Brother Fulkerson spoke reflectively: "We needs two more things then we've got in these hills—an' one thing less then we've got. We wants roads an' schools—and the end of makin' white licker."

Henderson saw Blossom slip from the bed and flit shadow-like through the door, and a few moments later he missed, too, the eagerly attentive presence of the boy. Blossom had escaped from the reek of tobacco smoke inside, to the soft cadences of the night-song and the silver wash of the moonlight.

Turner Stacy found her sitting, with her face between her palms, under a great oak that leaned out across the trickle of

the creek, and when he spoke her name, she raised eyes glistening with tears.

"Blossom," he began in a contrite voice, "ye're mad at me, ain't ye? Ye've done heerd about—about last night." Then he added with moody self-accusation, "God knows I don't blame ye none."

She turned her head away and did not at once answer. Suddenly her throat choked and she broke into sobs that shook her with their violence. The young man stood rigid, his face drawn with self-hatred and at last she looked up at him.

"Somehow, Turner," she said unsteadily, "hit wouldn't of been jest ther same ef hit had been any other time. Yestiddy —up thar on ther ridge—ye promised me thet ye'd be heedful with licker."

"I knows I did," he declared bitterly. "Ye've got a right ter plumb hate me."

"Ef I'd a-hated ye," she reminded him simply, "I wouldn't sca'cely have watched ther road all day." Then irrelevantly she demanded, "How did ye git yore shoulder hurt?"

The wish to defend himself with the palliations of last night's desperate fatigue and the chill in his wound was a strong temptation, but he repressed it. Knowledge of his encounter with Ratler Webb would only alarm her and conjure up fears of unforgiving vengeance.

"Hit war just a gun thet went off accidental-like," he prevaricated. "I wasn't harmed none, Blossom." Then in a tense voice he continued: "I only aimed ter drink a leetle —not too much—an' then somehow I didn't seem ter hev ther power ter quit."

He felt the lameness of that plea and broke off.

"I'd been studyin' about what you said on ther ridge," she told him falteringly, and the tremor of her voice electrified him. Again the mountains on their ancient foundations grew unsteady before his eyes.

"Does ye mean thet—thet despite last night—ye keers fer me?"

He bent forward, lips parted and heart pounding—and her reply was an unsteady whisper.

"I hain't plumb dead sartain yit, Turner, but—but this mornin' I couldn't think of nothin' else but you."

"Blossom!" exclaimed the boy, his voice ringing with a solemn earnestness. "I don't want thet ye shall hev ter feel shame fer me—but——"

Once again the words refused to come. The girl had risen now and stood slender in the silver light, her lashes wet with tears. With that picture in his eyes it became impossible to balance the other problems of his life. So he straightened himself stiffly and turned his gaze away from her. He was seeing instead a picture of the squat shanty where the copper worm was at work in the shadow, and for him it was a picture of bondage.

So she waited, feeling some hint of realization for the struggle his eyes mirrored.

There would be many other wet nights up there, he reflected as his jaw set itself grimly; many nights of chilled and aching bones with that wild thirst creeping seductively, overpoweringly upon him out of the darkness. There would be the clutch of longing, strangling his heart and gnawing at his stomach.

But if he *did* promise and failed, he could never again recover his self-respect. He would be doomed. With his face still averted, he spoke huskily and laboriously.

"I reckon thar hain't no way ter make ye understand, Blossom. I don't drink like some folks, jest ter carouse. I don't offentimes want ter tech hit, but seems like sometimes I jest *has* ter hev hit. Hit's most gin'rally when I'm plumb sick of livin' on hyar withouten no chance ter better myself."

Even in the moonlight she could see that his face was drawn and pallid. Then abruptly he wheeled:

"Ther Stacys always keeps thar bonds. I reckons ye wants me ter give ye my hand thet I won't never tech another drop, Blossom, but I kain't do thet yit—I've got ter fight hit out fust an' be plumb dead sartain thet I could keep my word ef I pledged hit——"

Blossom heard her father calling her from the porch and as she seized the boy's arms she found them set as hard as rawhide.

"I understands, Turney," she declared hastily, "an'—an'—I'm a-goin' ter be prayin' fer ye afore I lays down ternight!"

As Turner watched the preacher mount and ride away, his daughter walking alongside, he did not return to the house. He meant to fight it out in his own way. Last night when the hills had rocked to the fury of the storm—he had surrendered. Tonight when the moonlit slopes drowsed in the quiet of silver mists, the storm was in himself. Within a few feet of the gate he took his seat at the edge of a thick rhododendron bush, where the shadow blotted him into total invisibility. He sat there drawn of face and his hands clenched and unclenched themselves. He did not know it, but, in his silence and darkness, he was growing. There was for him a touch of Golgotha in those long moments of reflection and something of that anguished concentration which one sees in Rodin's figure of "The Thinker"—that bronze man bent in the melancholy travail of the birth of thought.

When an hour later Kinnard Towers and his cortège trooped out of Lone Stacy's house, Jerry Henderson, willing to breathe the freshness of the night, strolled along.

The men with the rifles swung to their saddles and rode a few rods away, but Towers himself lingered and at last with a steady gaze upon the stranger he made a tentative suggestion.

"I don't aim ter discourage a man thet's got fine ideas, Mr. Henderson, but hev ye duly considered thet when ye undertakes ter wake up a country thet's been slumberin' as

ye puts hit, fer two centuries, ye're right apt ter find some sleepy-heads thet would rather be—left alone?"

"I'm not undertaking a revolution," smiled the new arrival. "I'm only aiming to show folks, by my own example, how to better themselves."

The man who stood as the sponsor of the old order mounted and looked down from his saddle.

"Hain't thet right smart like a doctor a-comin' in ter cure a man," he inquired dryly, "a-fore ther sick person hes sent fer him? Sometimes ther ailin' one moutn't take hit kindly."

"I should say," retorted Henderson blandly, "that it's more like the doctor who hangs out his shingle—so that men can come if they like."

There was a momentary silence and at its end Towers spoke again with just a hint of the enigmatical in his voice.

"Ye spoke in thar of havin' personal knowledge thet ther railroad didn't aim ter come acrost Cedar Mounting, didn't ye?"

"Yes."

"Well now, Mr. Henderson—not meanin' ter dispute ye none—I don't feel so sartain about thet."

"I spoke from fairly definite information."

The man on horseback nodded.

"I aims ter talk pretty plain. We're a long ways behind ther times up hyar, an' thet means thet we likes ter sort of pass on folks thet comes ter dwell amongst us."

"I call that reasonable, Mr. Towers."

"I'm obleeged ter ye. Now jest let's suppose thet ther railroad *did* aim ter come in atter all an' let's jest suppose for ther fun of ther thing, thet hit likewise aimed ter grab off all ther best coal an' timber rights afore ther pore, ign'rant mountain-men caught on ter what war happenin'. In sich a case, ther fust step would be ter send a man on ahead, wouldn't hit—a mountain man, if possible—ter preach thet

ther railroad didn't aim ter come? Thet would mean bargains, wouldn't hit?"

Jerry Henderson laughed aloud.

"Do you mean that you suspect me of such a mission?"

Glancing about to assure himself that no one heard except his single auditor, the erstwhile hirer of assassins bent over his saddle pommel. Into the suavity of his voice had crept a new hardness and into the pale color of his eyes an ominous glint.

"Back in ther days of ther war with England, Mr. Henderson, I've heered tell thet our grandsires hed a flag with a rattlesnake on hit, an' ther words, 'Don't tread on me!' Some folks says we're right-smart like our grandsires back hyar in ther timber."

"If that's a threat, Mr. Towers," said Henderson steadily, "I make it a point never to understand them."

"An' I makes hit a point never ter give them more then onct. I don't say I suspicions ye—but I do *p'intedly* say this ter ye: Whatever yore real project air, afore ye goes inter hit too deep—afore ye invests all ye've got, an' all yore mother hes got an' all yore sister hes got, hit mout be right heedful ter ride over ter my dwellin'-house an' hev speech with me."

An indignant retort rose to Jerry's lips, but with diplomatic forbearance he repressed it.

"When I've been here a while, I guess your suspicions will be allayed without verbal assurances, Mr. Towers."

"Even if ye only comes preachin' ther drivin' out of licker," said Towers slowly, "ye're treadin' on my friends. We suffers Sabbath talk like thet from preachers, but we don't relish hit on week-days from strangers. In thar a while back I listened. I seen ye an' Brother Fulkerson a-stirrin' up an' onsettlin' ther young folks. I kin feel ther restless things thet's a-ridin' in ther wind ter-night, Mr. Henderson, an' hit hain't sca'cely right ter bring trouble on these folks thet's shelterin' ye."

Bear Cat Stacy, unseen but eagerly listening, felt a leaping of resentment in his veins. All the feudal instincts that had their currents there woke to wrath as he heard his hereditary enemy warning away his guest. It was the intolerable affront of a hint that the power of the Stacys had dwindled and waned until it could no longer secure the protection of its own roof-trees.

With the anger of Marmion for Angus, sternly repressed but forceful, Bear Cat suddenly stood out revealed in the moonlight. He had only to take a step, but the effect was precisely that of having been suddenly materialized out of nothingness, and when his voice announced him, even the case-hardened control of Kinnard Towers suffered a violent jolt of surprise.

"I reckon, Kinnard Towers," said the boy with a velvety evenness of voice, "ther day hain't hardly come yit when ther Stacys hes ter ask ye what visitors they kin take inter thar dwellin'-houses. I reckon mebby Mr. Henderson's ideas may suit some folks hyarabouts, even if they don't pleasure *you* none. So long as he aims ter tarry hyar, an' we aims ter enjoy him, ther man thet seeks ter harm him will hev ter come hyar an' git him."

Never since the feud had ended in a pact of peace, had two factional leaders come so near a rupture. Henderson could feel the ominous tensity in the air, but Towers himself only shook his head and laughed. It was a good-humored laugh, since this was not the time for open enmity.

"Oh, pshaw, son! I reckon nobody don't aim no harm to Mr. Henderson. I jest knows this country an' he ought ter realize thet my counsel mout help him." There was a brief pause and then with an audacity of bantering Kinnard proceeded. "I've done heered thet ye tuck yore dram onct in a while yoreself—mebby you've got friends thet makes licker—an' you knows how they mout feel about too much talk."

Bear Cat Stacy stood with his shoulders drawn back and his eyes smoldering.

"Thet's my business," he retorted curtly, but the Quarter-house baron went on with the same teasing smile.

"Mebby so, son, but hit kinderly 'peared like ter me thet Brother Fulkerson's gal war a-'lowin' thet hit war *her* business, too. I overheered yore maw say somethin' 'bout yore drinkin' some last night an' I seed Blossom's purty eyes flash."

The mounted man waved his hand and rode away, his escort falling in at front and rear, but when the cavalcade had turned the angle of the road Kinnard Towers beckoned Black Tom Carmichael to his side and spoke grimly.

"Thar's trouble breedin', Tom, an' this young Bear Cat Stacy's in ther b'ilin'. Ye played ther fool when yer failed ter git him as a kid. Hit war only a-layin' up torment erginst ther future."

Henderson lay long awake that night in the loft which he shared with Bear Cat. He heard the snores of the man and woman sleeping below, but the unmoving figure beside him had not relaxed in slumber. Henderson wondered if he were reflecting upon that talk by the gate and all the dark possibilities it might presage.

It was almost dawn, when Bear Cat slipped from under his quilt, drew on his shoes and trousers and left the loft-like attic, his feet making no sound on the rungs of the ladder.

What furtive mission was taking him out, pondered Henderson, into the laurel-masked hills at that hour?

But out in the creek-bed road, with the setting moon on his face, Bear Cat Stacy paused and drank in a long breath.

"He seen Blossom's eyes flash, he said," murmured the boy with his hands clenched at his sides, then he threw back his shoulders and spoke half aloud and very resolutely: "Wa'al they won't never hev ter flash no more fer thet cause." After a little while, his gaze fixed on the myriad stars, he spoke again. "God Almighty, I needs thet ye should holp me

now. I aims ter go dry fer all time—an' I kain't hardly compass hit withouten ye upholds me."

Wheeling abruptly, he went with long strides around the turn of the road. A half hour later he was noiselessly opening the gate of the preacher's house. He meant to wait there until Blossom awoke, but prompted by habit he gave, thrice repeated, the quavering and perfectly counterfeited call of a barn owl. Since she had been a very small girl, that had been their signal, and though she would not hear it now, it pleased him to repeat it.

Then to his astonishment he heard, very low, the whining creak of an opening door, and there before him, fully dressed, intently awake, stood the girl herself.

"Blossom," said Bear Cat in a low voice that trembled a little, "Blossom, I came over ter wait hyar till ye woke up. I came ter tell ye—thet I'm ready ter give ye my hand. I hain't never goin' ter tech a drap of licker no more, so long es I lives. I says hit ter ye with God Almighty listenin'."

"Oh, Turney——!" she exclaimed, then her voice broke and her eyes swam with tears. "I'm—I'm right proud of ye," was all she could find the words to add.

"Did I wake ye up?" demanded the boy in a voice of self-accusation. "I didn't aim to. I 'lowed I'd wait till mornin'."

Blossom shook her head. "I hain't been asleep yit," she assured him. Her cheeks flushed and she drooped her head as she explained. "I've been a-prayin, Turney. God's done answered my prayer."

Turner Stacy took off his hat and shook back the dark lock of hair that fell over his forehead. Beads of moisture stood out on his temples.

"Did ye keer—thet much, Blossom?" he humbly questioned, and suddenly the girl threw both arms about his neck. "I keers all a gal *kin* keer, Turney. I wasn't sartain afore—but I knowed hit es soon as I begun prayin' fer ye."

Standing there in the pallid mistiness before dawn, and yielding her lips to the pressure of his kiss, Blossom felt the almost religious solemnity of the moment. She was crossing the boundary of acknowledged love—and he had passed through the stress of terrific struggle before he had been able to bring her his pledge. His face, now cool, had been hot with its fevered passion. But she did not know that out of this moment was to be born transforming elements of change destined to shake her life and his; to quake the very mountains themselves; to rend the old order's crust, and finally, after tempest and bloodshed—to bring the light of a new day. No gift of prophecy told her that, of the parentage of this declaration of her love and this declaration of his pledge, was to be born in him a warrior's spirit of crusade which could only reach victory after all the old vindictive furies had been roused to wrath—and conquered—and the shadow of tragedy had touched them both.

And had Bear Cat Stacy, holding her soft cheek pressed to his own, been able to look even a little way ahead, he would have gone home and withdrawn the hospitality he had pledged to the guest who slept there.

CHAPTER VII

BECAUSE Jerry Henderson viewed the life of the hills through understanding eyes, certain paradoxes resolved themselves into the expected. He was not surprised to find under Lone Stacy's rude exterior an innate politeness which was a thing not of formula but of instinct.

"Would hit pleasure ye," demanded the host casually the next morning, "ter go along with me up thar an' see that same identical still thet I tuck sich pains yestiddy ye *shouldn't* see?" But Henderson shook his head, smiling.

"No, thank you. I'd rather not see any still that I can avoid. What I don't know can't get me—or anyone else—into trouble."

Lone Stacy nodded his approval as he said: "I didn't aim ter deny ye no mark of confi*dence*. I 'lowed I'd ought ter ask ye."

Turner Stacy stood further off from illiteracy than his father. In the loft which the visitor had shared with him the night before he had found a copy of the Kentucky Statutes and one of Blackstone's Commentaries, though neither of them was so fondly thumbed as the life of Lincoln.

By adroit questioning Jerry elicited the information that the boy had been as far along the way of learning as the sadly deficient district schools could conduct him; those shambling wayside institutions where, on puncheon benches, the children memorize in that droning chorus from which comes the local name of "blab-school."

Turner had even taken his certificate and taught for a term in one of these pathetic places. He laughed as he confessed this: "Hit jest proves how pore ther schools air, hyarabouts," he avowed.

"I expect you'd have liked to go to college," inquired Henderson, and the boy's eyes blazed passionately with his thwarted lust for opportunity—then dimmed to wretchedness.

"Like hit! Hell, Mr. Henderson, I'd lay my left hand down, without begrudgin' hit, an' cut hit off at ther wrist fer ther chanst ter do thet!"

Henderson sketched for him briefly the histories of schools that had come to other sections of the hills; schools taught by inspired teachers, with their model farms, their saw-mills and even their hospitals: schools to which not only children but pupils whose hair had turned white came and eagerly learned their alphabets, and as much more as they sought.

The boy raised a hand. "Fer God's sake don't narrate them things," he implored. "They sots me on fire. My grandsires hev been satisfied hyar fer centuries an' all my folks sees in me, fer dreamin' erbout things like thet, is lackin' of loyalty."

Henderson found his interest so powerfully engaged that he talked on with an access of enthusiasm.

"But back of those grandsires were other grandsires, Turner. They were the strongest, the best and the most American of all America; those earlier ancestors of yours and mine. They dared to face the wilderness, and those that got across the mountains won the West."

"Ours didn't git acrost though," countered the boy dryly. "Ours was them thet started out ter do big things an' failed."

Henderson smiled. "A mule that went lame, a failure to strike one of the few possible passes, made all the difference between success and failure in that pilgrimage, but the blood of those empire-builders is our blood and what they are now, we shall be when we catch up. We've been marking time while they were marching, that's all."

"Ye've done been off ter college yoreself, hain't ye, Mr. Henderson?"

"Yes. Harvard."

"Harvard? Seems ter me I've heered tell of hit. Air hit as good as Berea?"

The visitor repressed his smile, but before he could answer Bear Cat pressed on:

"Whilst ye're up hyar, I wonder ef hit'd be askin' too master much of ye ef—" the boy paused, gulped down his embarrassment and continued hastily— "ef ye could kinderly tell me a few books ter read?"

"Gladly," agreed Henderson. "It's the young men like you who have the opportunity to make life up here worth living for the rest."

After a moment Bear Cat suggested dubiously: "But amongst my folks I wouldn't git much thanks fer tryin'. Ther outside world stands fer interference—an' they won't suffer hit. They believes in holdin' with their kith an' kin."

Again Henderson nodded, and this time the smile that danced in his eyes was irresistibly infectious. In a low voice he quoted:

"The men of my own stock
They may do ill or well,
But they tell the lies I am wonted to,
They are used to the lies I tell.
We do not need intrpreters
When we go to buy and sell."

Bear Cat Stacy stood looking off over the mountain sides. He filled his splendidly rounded chest with a deep draft of the morning air,—air as clean and sparkling as a fine wine, and into his veins stole an ardor like intoxication.

In his eyes kindled again that light, which had made Henderson think of volcanoes lying quiet with immeasurable fires slumbering at their hearts.

Last night the boy had fought out the hardest battle of his life, and today he was one who had passed a definite milepost of progress. This morning, too, a seed had dropped and

a new life influence was stirring. It would take storm and stress and seasons to bring it to fulfilment, perhaps. The poplar does not grow from seed to great tree in a day—but, this morning, the seed had begun to swell and quicken.

What broke, like the fledgling of a new conception, in Bear Cat's heart, was less palpably but none the less certainly abroad in the air, riding the winds—with varied results.

That an outside voice was speaking: a voice which was dangerous to the old gods of custom, was the conviction entertained, not with elation but with somber resentment in the mind of Kinnard Towers. Upon that realization followed a grim resolve to clip the wings of innovation while there was yet time. It was no part of this crude dictator's program to suffer a stranger, with a gift for "glib speech," to curtail his enjoyment of prerogatives built upon a lifetime of stress and proven power.

Back of Cedar Mountain, where there are few telephones, news travels on swift, if unseen wings. Henderson had not been at Lone Stacy's house twenty-four hours when the large excitement of his coming, gathering mythical embellishment as it passed from mouth to mouth, was mysteriously launched.

Wayfarers, meeting in the road and halting for talk, accosted each other thus:

"I heer tell thar's a man over ter Lone Stacy's house thet's done been clar ter ther other world an' back. He's met up with all character of outlanders."

Having come back from "ther other world" did not indeed mean, as might be casually inferred, that Henderson had risen from his grave; relinquishing his shroud for a rehabilitated life. It signified only that he had been "acrost the waters"—a matter almost as vague. So the legend grew as it traveled, endowing Jerry with a "survigrous" importance.

"Folks says," went the rumor, "thet he knows ways fer a man ter make a livin' offen these-hyar tormentin' rocks. Hev ye seed him yit?"

Having come to the house of Lone Stacy, it was quite in accordance with the custom of the hills that he should remain there indefinitely. His plans for acquiring land meant first establishing himself in popular esteem and to this end no means could have contributed more directly than acceptance under a Stacy roof.

With the younger Stacy this approval was something more: it savored of hero-worship and upon Henderson's store of wisdom, Bear Cat's avid hunger for knowledge feasted itself.

Henderson saw Blossom often in these days and her initial shyness, in his presence, remained obdurate. But through it he caught, with a refreshing quality, the quick-flashing alertness of her mind and he became anxious to win her confidence and friendship.

And she, for all her timidity, was profoundly impressed and fed vicariously on his wisdom—through the enthusiastic relaying of Bear Cat Stacy's narration.

When conversation with Jerry was unavoidable, Turner noted that she was giving a new and unaccustomed care to her diction, catching herself up from vernacular to an effort at more correct forms.

"Blossom," he gravely questioned her one day, "what makes ye so mindful of yore P's and Q's when ye hes speech with Jerry Henderson?"

"I reckon hit's jest shame fer my ign'rance," she candidly replied, forgetting to be ashamed of it now that the stranger was no longer present.

"And yit," he reminded her, "ye've got more eddication now then common—hyarabouts."

"*Hyarabouts,* yes," came the prompt retort, touched with irony. "So hev *you.* Air ye satisfied with hit?"

"No," he admitted honestly. "God knows I hain't!"

* * * *

One evening Kinnard Towers entered the saloon at the Quarterhouse and stood unobserved at the door, as he

watched the roistering crowd about the bar. It was a squalid place, but to the foreign eye it would have been, in a sordid sense, interesting. Its walls and the eight-foot stockade that went around it were stoutly builded of hewn timbers as though it had been planned with a view toward defense against siege.

A few lithographed calendars from mail-order houses afforded the sole note of decoration to the interior. The ordinary bar-mirror was dispensed with. It could hardly have come across the mountain intact. Had it come it could scarcely have survived.

The less perishable fixtures of woodwork and ceiling bore testimony to that in their pitted scars reminiscent of gun-play undertaken in rude sport—and in deadly earnest. The shutters, heavy and solid, had on occasion done service as stretchers and cooling boards. Vilely odorous kerosene lamps swung against the walls, dimly abetted by tin reflectors, and across the floor went the painted white line of the state border. At the room's exact center were two huge letters. That east of the line was V. and that west was K.

The air was thick with the reek of smoke and the fumes of liquor. The boisterousness was raucously profane—the general atmosphere was that of an unclean rookery.

As the proprietor stood at the threshold, loud guffaws of maudlin laughter greeted his ears and, seeking the concrete cause, his gaze encountered Ratler Webb, propped against the bar, somewhat redder of eye and more unsteady on his legs than usual. Obviously he was the enraged butt of ill-advised heckling.

"Ye hadn't ought ter hev crossed Bear Cat," suggested a badgering voice. "Then ye wouldn't hev a busted nose. He's a bad man ter fool with. Thar war witches at his bornin'."

"I reckon Bear Cat knows what's healthful fer him," snarled Webb. "When we meets in ther highway he rides plumb round me."

The speaker broke off and, with a sweeping truculence, challenged contradiction. "Air any of you men friends of his'n? Does airy one of ye aim ter dispute what I says?" Silence ensued, possibly influenced by the circumstance that Ratler's hand was on his pistol grip as he spoke, so he continued:

"Ef I sought ter be a damn' tale-bearer, I could penitenshery him fer blockadin' right now, but thet wouldn't satisfy me nohow. I aims ter handle him my own self."

Again there was absence of contradiction near about the braggart, though ripples of derisive mirth trickled in from the outskirts.

Ratler jerked out his weapon and leaned against the bar. As he waved the muzzle about he stormed furiously: "Who laughed back thar?" And no one volunteered response.

Webb squinted hazily up at one of the reflector-backed lamps. "Damn thet light," he exclaimed. "Hit hurts my eyes." There followed a report and the lamp fell crashing.

For a brief space the drunken man stood holding the smoking weapon in his hand, then he looked up and started, but this time he let the pistol swing inactive at his side and the truculent blackness of his face faded to an expression of dismay.

Kinnard Towers stood facing him with an unpleasant coldness in his eyes.

"I reckon, Ratler," suggested the proprietor, "ye'd better come along with me. I wants ter hev peaceable speech with ye."

In a room above-stairs Kinnard motioned him to a chair much as a teacher might command a child taken red-handed in some mad prank.

"Ratler, hit hain't a right wise thing ter talk over-much," he volunteered at last. "Whar *air* thet still ye spoke erbout—Bear Cat Stacy's still?"

Webb cringed.

"I war jest a-talkin'. I don't know nuthin' erbout no sich still."

What means of loosening unwilling tongues Kinnard Towers commanded was his own secret. A half hour later he knew what he wished to know and Ratler Webb left the place. Upon his Ishmaelite neck was firmly fastened the collar of vassalage to the baron of the Quarterhouse.

On the day following that evening Towers talked with Black Tom Carmichael.

"This man Henderson," he said musingly, "air plumb stirring up ther country. I reckon hit'd better be seen to."

Black Tom nodded. "Thet oughtn't ter be much trouble." But Towers shook his blond head with an air of less assured confidence.

"Ter me hit don't look like no easy matter. Lone Stacy's givin' him countenance. Ef I war ter run him outen these parts I reckon ther Stacys would jest about swarm inter war over hit."

"What does ye aim ter do, Kinnard?"

"So far I'm only bidin' my time, but I aims ter keep a mighty sharp eye on him. He hain't made no move yit, but he's gainin' friends fast an' a man's obleeged ter kinderly plan ahead. When ther time's ripe he's got ter go." Towers paused, then added significantly, "One way or another—but afore thet's undertook, I 'lows ter git rid of his protectors."

"Thet's a mighty perilous thing ter try, Kinnard," demurred the lieutenant in a voice fraught with anxiety. "Ye kain't bring hit ter pass without ye opens up ther war afresh —an' *this* time they'd hev Bear Cat ter lead 'em."

But Towers smiled easily.

"I've got a plan, Tom. They won't even suspicion I knows anything about events. I'm goin' ter foller Mr. Henderson's counsel an' do things ther *new* way, 'stid of ther old."

CHAPTER VIII

HENDERSON found Brother Fulkerson a preacher who, more by service and example and comforting the disconsolate than by pulpit oratory, held a strong influence upon his people, and commanded their deep devotion.

His quiet minstry had indeed been heard of beyond the hills and even in the black days of feudal hatred, dead lines had been wiped out for him so that he came and went freely among both factions, and no man doubted him.

Kindly, grave and steadfast, Henderson found him to be, and possessed of a natively shrewd brain, as well. Blossom was usually at the Fulkerson house when Jerry called, but she fitted silently in the background and her eyes regarded him with that shy gravity, in which he found an insurmountable barrier to better acquaintance.

One morning as he passed the Fulkerson abode he found the girl alone by the gate—and paused there.

The season's first tenderness of greenery along the slopes had ripened now to the sunburned and freckled warmth of midsummer, but the day was young enough for lingering drops of the heavy dew to remain on the petals of the morning-glories and the weed stalks along the roadside. Between the waxen delicacy and rich variety of the morning-glory petals and the bloom of the girl, Jerry fell musingly to tracing analogies.

The morning-glory is among the most plebeian of flowering things, boasting no nobility except a charm too fragile to endure long its coarse companionship with smart-weed and mullen, so that each day it comes confidently into being only to shrink shortly into disappointed death.

Blossom, too, would in the course of nature and environment, have a brief bloom and a swift fading—but just now her beauty was only enhanced by the pathos of its doom.

"Blossom," he smilingly suggested, "I'd like to be friends with you, just as I am with Turner. I'm not really an evil spirit you know, yet you seem always half afraid of me."

The girl's lashes drooped shyly, veiling her splendid eyes, but she made no immediate response to his amenities, and Henderson laughed.

"It's all the stranger," he said, "because I can't forget our first meeting. Then you were the spirit of warfare. I can still seem to see you standing there barring the path; your eyes ablaze and your nostrils aquiver with righteous wrath."

For an instant, in recollection of the incident, she forgot her timidity and there flashed into her face the swift illumination of a smile.

"Thet war when I 'lowed ye war an enemy. Folks don't show no—I mean don't show any—fear of thar enemies. Leastways—at least—mountain folks don't."

He understood that attitude, but he smiled, pretending to misconstrue it.

"Then I'm not dangerous as an enemy? It's only when I seek to be a friend that I need be feared?"

Her flush deepened into positive confusion and her reply was faltering.

"I didn't mean nothin' like thet. Hit's jest thet when I tries ter talk with ye, I feels so plumb ign'rant an'—an' benighted—thet—thet——" She broke off and the man leaning on the fence bent toward her.

"You mean that when you talk to me you think I'm comparing you with the girls I know down below, isn't that it?"

Blossom nodded her head and added, "With gals—girls I mean—that wears fancy fixin's an' talks grammar."

"Sit down there for a minute, Blossom," he commanded,

and when she had enthroned herself on the square-hewn horse-block by the gate he seated himself, cross-legged at her feet.

"Grammar isn't so very hard to learn," he assured her. "And any woman who carries herself with your lance-like ease, starts out equipped with more than 'fancy fixin's.' I want to tell you about a dream I had the other night."

At once her face grew as absorbed as a child's at the promise of a fairy story.

"I dreamed that I went to a very grand ball in a city down below. The ladies were gorgeously dressed, but late in the evening an unknown girl came into the room and everybody turned to look at her, forgetting all the rest of the party." He paused a moment before adding, "I dreamed that that girl was you."

"What did they all hev ter say about me?" she eagerly demanded.

"To be perfectly frank—you see it was a dream—most of them just exclaimed: 'My God!'"

"I don't hardly censure 'em," admitted Blossom. "I reckon I cut a right sorry figger at that party."

Henderson laughed aloud.

"But don't you see, that wasn't it at all. They were all breathless with admiration. You had the things they would have given all their jewels for—things they can't buy."

For a little space she looked at him with serious, pained eyes, suspicious of ridicule, then the expression altered to bewilderment, and her question came in a lowered voice.

"Things I hev thet they lacks? What manner of things air them—I mean——those?"

"The very rare gifts of originality and an elfin personality," he assured her. "Besides that you have beauty of the freshest and most colorful sort."

For a moment Blossom flushed again shyly, then she lifted one hand and pointed across the road.

"See thet white flower? Thet's wild parsely. I always

calls it the pore relation to the elder bush—but it's jest got to stay a pore relation—always—because it started out thet way."

Henderson, as the summer progressed, discovered an absurd thought lurking in his mind with annoying pertinacity. He could not for long banish the fanciful picture of Blossom Fulkerson transplanted—of Blossom as she might be with fuller opportunities for development. There is an undeniable fascination in building air-castles about the Cinderella theme of human transformations and the sight of her always teased his imagination into play.

That these fantasies bore any personal relation to himself he did not admit or even suspect. Readily enough, and satisfactorily enough he explained to himself that he, who was accustomed to a life of teeming activities, was here marooned in monotony. All things are measurable by contrasts, and in her little world, Blossom stood out radiantly and exquisitely different from her colorless sisters. When he had crossed Cedar Mountain again and boarded a railroad train, more vital things would engage him, and he would promptly forget the beautiful little barbarian.

One hot afternoon in late July Jerry Henderson sat in the lounging-room of his club in Louisville. The windows were open and the street noises, after the still whispers of the mountains, seemed to beat on his senses with discordant insistence. Down the length of the broad, wainscoted hall he saw a party of young men in flannels and girls in soft muslins passing out and he growled testily.

"All cut to a single pattern!" he exclaimed. "All impeccably monotonous!" Then he irrelevantly added to himself, "I'm allowing myself to become absurd—I expect its the damned heat. Anyhow she's Bear Cat Stacy's gal!"

As Jerry sat alone he was, quite unconsciously, affording a theme of conversation for two fellow clubmen in the billiard-room.

"I see Jerry Henderson has reappeared in our midst," commented one. "I wonder what titanic enterprise is engaging his genius just now."

"Give it up," was the laconic reply. "But whatever it is, I'm ready to wager he'll emerge from it unscathed and that everybody who backs him will be ruined. That's the history of his buccaneer activities up to date."

"What's his secret? Why don't his creditors fall on him and destroy him?" inquired the first speaker and his companion yawned.

"It's the damned charm of the fellow, I suppose. He could hypnotize the Shah of Persia into Calvinism."

For a moment the speakers fell silent, watching a shot on the pool-table, then one of them spoke with languid interest.

"Whatever we may think of our friend Henderson, he's a picturesque figure, and he's running a most diverting race. He's always just a jump behind a billion dollars and just a jump ahead of the wolf and the constable."

While this conversation proceeded, a heavy-set and elderly gentleman, with determined eyes, entered the club. It was President Wallace of the C. and S-E Railways, and palpably something was on his mind.

Glancing in at the reading-room, and seeing Henderson there, he promptly disposed himself in a heavily cushioned chair at his side and inquired:

"Well, what have you to report?"

"Very little so far," rejoined Henderson with his suavest smile. "You see, there's a man up there who has an annoying capacity for seeing into things and through things. On the day of my arrival he put his finger on my actual purpose in coming."

"You mean Kinnard Towers, I presume." The railroad president drummed thoughtfully on the table-top with his fingers. "I was afraid he would try to hold us up."

Jerry nodded. "He pretends to be unalterably opposed to innovation, but I fancy he really wants to be let in on the ground floor. He has decided that unless he shares our loot, there is to be no plundering."

"Possibly," the railroad magnate spoke thoughtfully, "we'd better meet his terms. The damned outlaw has power up there and we stand to win—or lose—a little empire of wealth."

Henderson's closed fist fell softly but very firmly on the table. His tone was smooth and determined. "Please leave me in command for a while, Mr. Wallace. I mean to beat this highbinder at his own favorite game. If we yield to him he'll emasculate our profits. You gave me five years when we first discussed this thing. In that time I can accomplish it."

"Take seven if you need them. It's worth it."

Sitting in the smoking-car of the train that was transporting him again from civilization to "back of beyond," Jerry Henderson found himself absorbed in somewhat disquieting thoughts.

He gazed out with a dulled admiration on the fertility of blue-grass farms where the land rolled with as smooth and gracious a swell as a woman's bosom. Always heretofore the Central Kentucky mansions with their colonial dignity and quiet air of pride had brought an eager appreciation to his thoughts—the tribute of one who worships an aristocracy based on wealth.

But now when he saw again the tangled underbrush and outcropping rock of the first foothills, something in him cried out, for the first time since boyhood, "I'm going home!" When the altitudes began to clamber into the loftiness of peaks, with wet streamers of cloud along their slopes, the feeling grew. The sight of an eagle circling far overhead almost excited him.

Jerry Henderson was a soldier of fortune, with Napoleonic

dreams, and finance was his terrain of conquest. To its overweening ambition he had subordinated everything else. To that attainment he had pointed his whole training, cultivating himself not only in the practicalities of life but also in its refinements, until his bearing, his speech, his manners were possibly a shade too meticulously perfect; too impeccably starched.

Where other men had permitted themselves mild adventures in love and moderate indulgence in drink, he had set upon his conduct a rigid censorship.

His heart, like his conduct, had been severely schooled, for upon marriage, as upon all else, he looked with an opportunist's eye.

His wife must come as an ally, strengthening his position socially and financially. She must be a lady of the old aristocracy, bringing to his house cultivated charm and the power of wealth. She must be fitted, when he took his place among the financially elect, to reign with him.

So it was strange that as he sat here in the smoking-car he should be thinking of an unlettered girl across Cedar Mountain, and acknowledging with a boyish elation that on the way to Lone Stacy's house he would pass her cabin, see her—hear the lilting music of her laugh.

And when Cedar Mountain itself rose before him he swung his way with buoyant stride, up one side and down the other of the range.

Blossom was not in sight when at last he reached the Fulkerson cabin, but the door stood open and Henderson approached it stealthily. He paused for a moment, pondering how conspicuously the small house contrasted with the shabbiness of its neighborhood. It was as trim as a Swiss chalet, reflecting the personality of its mistress. Door frames and window casings were neatly painted—and he knew that was Bear Cat's labor of love. The low hickory-withed chairs on the porch were put together with an approach to a crafts-

man's skill—and he knew that, too, was Bear Cat's labor of love.

As he reached the porch he saw the girl herself sitting just within, and a broad shaft of sun fell across her, lighting the exquisite quality of her cheeks and the richness of her hair. She was bending studiously over a book, and her lips were drooping with an unconscious wistfulness.

Then, as his shadow fell, Blossom looked up and, in the sudden delight with which she came to her feet, she betrayed her secret of a welcome deeper than that accorded to a friendly but casual stranger.

They were still very much engrossed in each other when half an hour later Bear Cat Stacy appeared without warning in the door. For just a moment he halted on the threshold with pained eyes, before he entered.

The two men walked home together and, along the way, the younger was unaccountably silent. His demeanor had relapsed into that shadow of sullenness which it had often worn before Henderson's coming.

Finally Jerry smilingly demanded an explanation and Bear Cat Stacy turned upon him a face which had suddenly paled. He spoke with a dead evenness.

"We've been honest with each other up to now, Mr. Henderson, an' I demands thet ye be honest with me still."

"I aim to be, Turner. What is it?"

The younger man gulped down a lump which had suddenly risen in his throat, and jerked his head toward the house they had just left.

"Hit's Blossom. Does ye aim ter—ter co'te her?"

"Court her! What put such an idea into your head?"

"Never mind what put hit thar. I've got ter know! Blossom hain't never promised ter wed me, yit, but——" He broke off and for a little while could not resume though his face was expressive enough of his wretchedness. Finally he echoed: "I've got to know! Ef she'd ruther marry *you*,

she's got a license ter choose a-tween us. Only I hadn't never thought of thet—an'——." Once more he fell silent.

"My God, Turner," exclaimed Jerry, with a sudden realization of the absurdity of such an idea, "I could have no thought of marrying her."

"Why couldn't ye?" For an instant the gray eyes narrowed and into them came a dangerous gleam. "Hain't she good enough—fer you or any other man?"

Jerry Henderson nodded with grave assent.

"She's good enough for any man alive," he declared. "But I can't think of marriage at all now. All my plans of life prohibit that." Bear Cat Stacy drank in the clear air in a long breath of joyous relief.

"That's all I needs ter know," he said with entire sincerity. "Only," his voice dropped and he spoke very gently, "only, I reckon ye don't realize how much yore eddycation counts with us thet wants hit an' hain't got hit. Don't let her misunderstand ye none, Mr. Henderson. I don't want ter see her hurt."

CHAPTER IX

MARLIN TOWN lies cradled in the elbow of the river and about its ragged edges the hills stand beetling, hemming it in.

Had it been located in Switzerland, it would have been acclaimed in guide-book and traveler's tales for the sheer beauty of its surroundings.

Hither, when the summer had spent its heat and the hard duties of the farmer had relaxed, flocked the men and women and the children of the country side for that annual diversion which combined with the ardor of religious pilgrimage a long-denied hunger for personal intercourse and excitement. Then, in fine, came "big-meeting time."

The clans gathered from " 'way over on t'other side of nowhars." They trooped in from communities which the circuit rider visited so rarely that it was no disgrace for a man and a maid to dwell together as man and wife until a child had been born to them before opportunity came to have the marriage rites solemnized. They flocked from localities so remote that in them sometimes the dead lay buried without funeral until an itinerant minister chanced by to hold obsequies over all delinquent graves in common. It is even told how occasionally a widowed husband wept over the mortal remains of his first and second wife—at a sermon held for both.

So while the magnet which draws them out of their deep-burrowed existence is the Camp-meeting with its hymns and discourse, the occasion holds also the secular importance of county-fair and social conclave.

Brother Fulkerson left his cabin before daylight one morning for the journey to town, riding his old mare, with his daughter on a pillion behind him. With them started Lone

Stacy, Bear Cat and Henderson, though since these three must travel with only two mules, the younger men followed the ancient custom of "riding and tying"—alternating in the saddle and on foot.

The air held the heady bouquet of autumn now with the flavor of cider presses and of ripened fox-grapes for the delight of the nostril and the dreamy softness of hazy horizons for the eye.

Oak and poplar flaunted their carnival color along the hillsides. Maples threw out scarlet and orange banners against the sedate tone of the pines and cedars. Among the falling acorns of the woods, mast-fed razor-backs were fattening against the day of slaughter, when for a little while the scantily supplied cabin-dwellers would be abundantly provisioned with pork and cider.

Bear Cat's eyes dwelt steadfastly on Blossom, and Jerry Henderson's turned toward her oftener than he meant them to. There was, in the air, a pervasive holiday spirit.

Roads usually so bare of travel were full now, full with a rude procession of wayfarers; men trudging along with trailing families at their heels; calico-clad women riding sideways on bony steeds, sometimes bizarre in fanciful efforts at finery; tow-headed children with wide-staring eyes.

Then at last they were in Marlin Town, rubbing shoulders with all the narrow mountain world. There was Kinnard Towers riding among his rifle-armed henchmen. He sat stiff in his saddle, baronially pleased as men pointed him out,—and Jerry thought it a safe wager that Kinnard had not come as a convert to the mourners' bench.

Towers nodded affably and shouted his salutation in passing.

But among all the strange types foregathered here with a tone of the medieval about them and over them, none were more fantastic than the two preachers who were to conduct the revival. Brother Fulkerson and his party encountered

this pair as they passed the Court-house. Both were tall, cadaverous and preternaturally solemn of visage. Both wore rusty Prince Albert coats faded to a threadbare green. One had a collar and no necktie; the other a necktie and no collar. Between the frayed bottoms of shrunken trousers and the battered tops of crude brogans each showed a dusty and unstockinged shank.

"Who are these preachers we're going to hear?" inquired Jerry Henderson, and Brother Fulkerson shook his head dubiously.

"I heer tell thet they're some new sect," was the guarded reply. "I don't hold with them none, myself."

"They are sensational exhorters, I take it," hazarded Jerry, and again the preacher from across the mountain tempered his criticism with charity:

"Folks say so. I don't aim ter jedge 'em though—leastways not till I've sat under th'ar discourse first."

But Bear Cat was restrained by no such inhibition and his voice was openly scornful.

"They're ther sort of preachers thet keeps folks benighted. All they teaches is superstition an' ign'rance."

"Son," suggested Lone Stacy with a grave consideration, "I wouldn't hardly condemn 'em unheard, ef I was you. They claims ter be preachers of God's word, an' thar's room, a-plenty, fer all sorts an' sects."

But the younger man's eyes glowed with that tawny fire of militant rebellion, which was awakening in him against all the shackling influences of mental lethargy.

"They don't believe in book larnin'," went on Bear Cat contemptuously, "because they says thar hain't no Holy Ghost in hit. They harangues so long es thar wind holds out, an' all they keers about is how many takes a big through at meetin'."

Jerry smiled at the characterization. He had seen men and women "take big throughs," that hysterical — and often

ephemeral declaration of conversion which measures its overwrought zeal by the vehemence of outcry and bodily contortion with which the convert comes through to the mourners' bench.

Later in the day Henderson and Bear Cat, returning from the livery stable, were walking single-file along the narrow plank that served as a sidewalk, when they encountered a young man, blood-shot of eye and malevolent of expression. Either Bear Cat Stacy who was in advance or the newcomer must step down into the mud and surrender the right-of-way. If pedestrians so situated are friends, each will be prompt of courtesy. If they are enemies, ethics require that the weaker will must yield and the stronger hold to its rights.

Now Henderson perceived that the two were confronting each other rigidly. Over Turner's shoulder he could see the bleary eyes of the other smolder with a wrath that he knew meant blood-lust as Bear Cat waved his hand in an imperious gesture which commanded as plainly as words, "Give me the road!"

It was a brief and tense situation, but it was being publicly observed and he who surrendered would be branded in street-corner gossip with cowardice.

Passers-by, across the way, halted and held their breath. The more timid glanced about for shelter should gun-play ensue, but after an instant Ratler Webb turned grudgingly aside and stepped down into the outer road. Bear Cat Stacy walked on, stiffly erect, and he did not turn his head for a backward glance.

Ratler halted where he stood, dangerously snarling, and his hand fumbled for a moment under his coat. He challengingly swept the faces of all men in sight, and murmurs of laughter, which had broken out in sheer relief at a relaxed tension, died as abruptly as they had begun. Every pair of eyes became studiously inattentive.

* * * *

Through the crowds that overflowed the town moved one figure who seemed more the Ishmaelite than even the disgraced Ratler.

Men who had, in the past, plotted against each other's lives today "met an' made their manners" with all outward guise of complete amity, yet this one figure walked ungreeted or recognized only with the curt nod which was in itself a modified ostracism. It must be said of him that he bore the baleful insistence of public enmity with a half-contemptuous steadiness in his own eyes, and a certain bold dignity of bearing. Mark Tapier—mongrelized by mountain pronunciation into Tapper—was the revenue officer and behind him, though operating from remote distance, lay the power of Washington.

To comprehend the universal hatred of the backwoods highlander for the "revenue" one must step back from today's standard of vision into the far past and accept that prejudice which existed when as legalistic a mind as Blackstone said: "From its original to the present time, the very name of excise has been odious to the people of England," and when Dr. Johnson defined the term in his dictionary as: "A hateful tax levied upon commodities . . . by wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid."

Such a "wretch" was Mark Tapper in the local forum of public thought; a wretch with an avocation dependent upon stealth and treachery of broken confidences; profiting like Judas Iscariot upon blood-money.

Yet before the first day of "Big Meeting time" had progressed to noon, Mark Tapper sat in close and secret conference with the strongest and most typical exponent of the old order of the hills.

Into the side door of the Court-house strolled Kinnard Towers at ten-thirty in the morning. From the jailer, who was his vassal, he received the key which unlocked the small study giving off from the Circuit Court-room—the judge's chamber—now vacant and cobwebbed.

In this sanctum of the law's ostensible upholding, surrounded by battered volumes of code and precedent, the man who was above the law received first Jud White, the town marshal.

"I reckon sich a gatherin' of folks es this hyar sort of complicates yore job, jud," he began blandly. "I thought I ought to tell ye thet Ratler Webb's broguein' round town gittin' fuller of licker an' hostility every minute thet goes by."

The town marshal scowled with a joyless foreboding.

"Mebby," he tentatively mused, "hit moutn't be a bad idee ter clap him in ther jail-house right now—afore he gits too pizen mean ter handle."

But with judicial forbearance Kinnard Towers shook his head. "No, I wouldn't counsel ye ter do thet. Hit wouldn't be hardly lawful. I've done instructed Black Tom Carmichael ter kinderly keep an eye on him." After a moment he casually added: "Thar's bad blood betwixt Ratler an' young Bear Cat Stacy. Hit would sarve a better purpose fer ye ter keep a heedful watch on Bear Cat."

The town marshal's face fell. He felt that to him was being assigned a greater share than his poor deserts in the matter of safe-guarding the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth.

Towers caught the crestfallen frown and repressed a twinkle of amusement.

"What's ther matter, Jud? Air ye a-settin' on carpet tacks?" he inquired with even, good humor. "Or air ye jest plain skeered at ther idee of contraryin' Bear Cat Stacy?"

"No, I hain't skeered of Bear Cat," lied the officer, reddening. "Ef he breaches ther peace terday I aims ter jail him fer hit ther same es anybody else." He paused, then broke out with fervor: "But he's a mighty good man ter leave alone, Kinnard. He's ther best man ter leave alone I ever met up with, an' thet's God's own blessed truth."

Towers laughed. "Well, son, I aims ter be kinderly keepin' in touch with Bear Cat Stacy myself, an' ef any ruction rises

a-tween ye, I'll be thar ter straighten hit out. So, if need be, —why, jest treat him like anybody else—as ye says—an' don't be narvous about hit."

Ten minutes after the dejected exit of Jud White, Mark Tapper, the Revenuer, entered the front door of the Courthouse and shouldered his way aggressively among loungers who eyed him with hostile vindictiveness. Passing unchallenged between several rifle-bearers in the upper area, he entered the judge's office, where Towers sat expectantly waiting.

Kinnard opened the interview by drawing forth his wallet and counting sundry bank notes into Tapper's extended palm.

"Kinnard," suggested the federal sleuth irritably, "it was clearly understood between us that you were going to limit those stills you're interested in—not develop them into a damned syndicate."

Towers frowned a little. "Ther more thar is of 'em ther more ye gits, don't ye?"

"Yes, and where my revenue, from your hush money, increases a picayune, my peril increases—vastly. One tip to the government, and I'm ruined."

"Oh, pshaw, Mark," urged Towers conciliatingly, "hit's jest an exchange of leetle favors a-tween us. There's some fellers I've got ter kinderly protect an' thar's some information ye needs ter hev in yore business—so 'stid of wagin' war on one another we trades tergether. Thet's all."

For a few moments the revenue officer restlessly paced the room, then, halting before the desk, he rapped sharply with his knuckles. "Since I let myself in for this folly of selling you protection I'm not damned fool enough to try to threaten you. You can hurt me worse than I can hurt you—and have me assassinated to boot—but unless we can arrange things more to my liking, I'll get myself transferred to another district—and you'll have to begin all over again."

Towers did not at once answer. When he did it was with the air of one tendering the olive branch of peace.

"Set down, Mark, an' let's be reasonable. If so be thar's dissatisfaction I reckon we kin fix matters. Right now I've got a bigger project in mind than *thet*—an' I needs yore aid. This here Jerry Henderson stands mightily in my light an' I aims ter be rid of him. He hain't got no money invested hyar. He kin go without no loss ner trouble. He don't even hev ter put out ther fire an' call ther dawg. He sets by Lone Stacy's fire an' he hain't got no dawg."

"If you mean a watch-dog he doesn't need one—so long as the Stacys choose to protect him."

Towers slowly nodded. "Thet's right, but with Lone Stacy and Bear Cat moved away fer a leetle spell, hit would be as easy as old shoes."

"And how do you aim to move them?"

"Thet's whar you comes in, Mark. Lone's runnin' a blockade still over on Little Slippery."

The revenuer leaned forward with as unreceptive a stare as though his companion had graciously proffered him the gift of a hornet's nest.

"Hold on," he bluntly protested, "I have no evidence of that—and what's more, I don't want any."

"Air you like ther balance of 'em hyarabouts?" came Kinnard's satiric inquiry. "Air ye skeered ter tackle Bear Cat Stacy?"

Mark Tapper replied with entire sincerity.

"Yes, I'm afraid to tackle him—and I'm brave enough to admit it. Once in a century a man like that is born and he's born to be a master. I warn you betimes, Kinnard, *leave him alone!* Play with a keg of blasting powder and a lighted match if you like. Tickle a kicking mule if you've a mind to, but *leave Bear Cat alone!*" The minion of the federal law rose from his chair and spoke excitedly. "And if you're hell-bent on starting an avalanche, do it for yourself—don't try to make me pull it down on my own head, because I won't do it."

Kinnard Towers leaned back in the judge's swivel chair and laughed uproariously.

"Mark, right sensibly at times, ye shows signs of human discernment. I hain't seekin' no open rupture with this young tiger cat my own self. I aims ter show in this matter only es his friend. *You* hain't overly popular with them Stacys nohow an' I've got hit all *dee*vised, ter plumb convince 'em thet ye're only actin' in ther lawful discharge of yore duty."

"That will be very nice—if you succeed," commented the proposed catspaw dryly.

"I aims ter succeed," came the prompt assurance. "I aims ter demonstrate thet thar war so much talkin' goin' round thet ye war plumb obleeged ter act an' thet thar hain't no profit in resistin'. I'll tell 'em hit's a weak case atter all. They won't harm ye. Ye hain't a-goin' ter arrest ther boy nohow—jest ther old man."

"And leave Bear Cat foot-loose to avenge his daddy! No thank you. Not for me."

Again Towers smiled. "Now don't be short-sighted, Mark. Bear Cat won't be hyar neither."

"Why won't he be here? Because you'll tell him to go?"

"I won't need ter say a word. His daddy'll counsel him ter leave fer a spell an' hide out—so thet he kain't be tuck down ter Looeyville fer a gover'*ment* witness."

"When am I supposed to perform this highly spectacular stunt?" inquired Mark Tapper.

"I aims ter hev ye do hit this afternoon."

"This afternoon—with every foot of street and sidewalk full of wild men, ready to pull me to pieces!" The revenuer's face was hot with amazement. "Besides I have no evidence."

"Ye kin git thet later," Towers assured him calmly. "Besides we don't keer a heap if ye fails ter convict. We only wants 'em outen ther way fer a while. Es fer ther crowds, I'm fixed ter safeguard ye. I've got all my people hyar—ready—an' armed. I aims ter run things an' keep peace in Marlin Town terday!"

CHAPTER X

ON the river bank at the outskirts of Marlin Town that afternoon so primitive was the aspect of life that it seemed appropriate to say in Scriptural form: "A great multitude was gathered together." The haze of Indian summer lay veil-like and sweetly brooding along the ridged and purple horizon. The mountainsides flared with torch-like fires of autumnal splendor—and the quaint old town with its shingled roofs and its ox-teams in the streets, lay sleepily quiet in the mid-distance.

Toward the crudely constructed rostrum of the two preachers in long-tailed coats, strained the eyes of the throng, pathetically solemn in their tense earnestness. Men bent with labor and women broken by toil and perennial child-bearing; children whose faces bore the stupid vacuity of in-bred degeneracy; other children alert and keen, needing only the chance they would never have. It was a sea of unlettered humanity in jeans and calico, in hodden-gray and homespun —seeking a sign from Heaven, less to save their immortal souls than to break the tedium of their mortal weariness.

Henderson stood with folded arms beside the preacher whose pattern of faith differed from that of the two exhorters he had come to hear. Blossom's cheeks were abloom and her eyes, back of their grave courtesy, rippled with a suppressed amusement. To her mind, her father exemplified true ministry and these others were interesting quacks, but to Bear Cat, standing at her elbow, they were performers whose clownish antics savored of charlatanism—and who capitalized the illiteracy of their hearers. Lone Stacy was there, too, but with a mask-like impassiveness of feature that betrayed neither the trend nor color of his thought.

Not far distant, though above and beyond the press of the crowd, stood the Towers chief, and his four guardians, and shifting here and there, sauntered others of his henchmen, swinging rifles at their sides and watchful, through their seeming carelessness, for any signal from him. Once for a moment Henderson caught a glimpse of Ratler Webb's skulking figure with a vindictive glance bent upon Bear Cat—but in another instant he had disappeared.

The first of the exhorters had swung into the full tide of his discourse. His arm swung flail-like. His eyes rolled in awe-provoking frenzy. His voice leaped and fell after the fashion of a troubled wind and through his pauses there came back to him the occasional low wail of some almost convinced sinner. Gradually, under this invocation of passionate phrase and "holy-tone," the tide of crowd-psychology was mounting to hysteria.

Between sentences and phrases the preacher interlarded his sermon with grunts of emotion-laden "Oh's" and "Ah's."

"Fer them thet denies ther faith, oh brethren—Oh! Ah! ther pits of hell air yawnin' wide an' red! Almighty God air jest a-bidin' His time afore He kicks 'em inter ther ragin', fiery furnace an' ther caldrons of molten brimstone, Oh! Ah!"

The speaker rolled his eyes skyward until only their whites remained visible. With his upflung fingers clawing talon-wise at the air he froze abruptly out of crescendo into grotesque and motionless silence.

Through the close-ranked listeners ran a shuddering quaver, followed by a sighing sound like rising wind which in turn broke into a shrieking chorus of "Amens!" and "Hallelujahs!"

The simple throng was an instrument upon which he played. Their naive credulity was his keyboard. Joel Fulkerson's eyes were mirrors of silent pain as he looked on and listened. "Lord God," he said in his heart, "I have toiled

a lifetime in Thy service and men have hardened their hearts. Yet to these who harangue them in the market-place, they give ear—ay, and shed abundant tears."

Then the long-coated, long-haired preacher having exhausted the dramatic value of the pause, launched himself afresh.

"Ther Lord hes said thet ef a man hes faith, even so sizeable es a mustard seed, he shell say ter thet mounting, 'move' an' hit'll plumb move! Oh-Ah!"

Once more the tone dwindled to a haunting whisper, then vaulted into sudden thunder.

"Brethren, *I hev* sich faith! Right now I could say ter thet thar mounting thet's stood thar since ther commencement of time, 'Move,' an' hit would roll away like a cloud afore ther wind! Right now afore ye all, I could walk down ter thet river an' cross hits deep waters dry-shod!"

Jerry Henderson, looking with amusement about the overwrought crowd, saw no spirit of skepticism on any untutored face, only a superstitiously deep earnestness everywhere.

Now even the hysterical "Amens!" which had been like responses to a crazed litany were left unspoken. The hearers sat in a strained silence; a voicelessness of bated breath—as if awed into a trance. That stillness held hypnotically and long.

Then like a bomb bursting in a cathedral came a clear voice, frankly scornful and full of challenge from somewhere on the fringe of the congregation.

"All right—let's see ye do hit! Let's see ye walk over ther waters dry-shod!"

Petrified, breathlessly shocked, men and women held for a little space their stunned poses, so that a margin of silence gave emphasis to the sacrilege. Then, gradually gathering volume, from a gasp to a murmur, from a murmur to a sullen roar, spoke the voice of resentment. Some indignant person, wanting full comprehension and seeking only a Bib-

lical form of expression, shouted loudly: "Crucify him!" and following that, pandemonium drowned out individual utterances.

Kinnard Towers did not share in the general excitement. He only bit liberally from his tobacco plug and remarked: "I reckon Bear Cat Stacy's drunk ergin." But Bear Cat Stacy, standing at the point from which he had interrupted the meeting, looked on with blazing eyes and said nothing.

"Now ye've done gone an' made another damn' fool of yourself!" whispered his father hoarsely in his ear. "Ye've done disturbed public worship—an' as like es not hit'll end in bloodshed."

Turner made no reply. His fingers were tense as they gripped biceps equally set. The fury of his face died into quiet seriousness. If the howling mob destroyed him he had, at least, flung down the gauntlet to these impostors who sought to victimize the helplessness of ignorance.

About him surged a crowd with shuffling feet and murmuring undertones; a crowd that moved and swayed like milling cattle in a corral, awaiting only leadership for violence. Then abruptly a pistol shot ripped out, followed instantly by another, and the edges of the throng began an excited eddying of stampede.

The babel of high voices, questioning, volunteering unreliable information, swelling into a deep-throated outcry, became inarticulate. The first impression was that some one in a moment of fanaticism had conceived himself called upon to punish sacrilege. The second had it that Bear Cat Stacy himself, not satisfied with his impious beginnings, was bent on carrying his disturbance to a more sweeping conclusion. Neither assumption was accurate.

A few moments before Bear Cat's outbreak, Kinnard Towers had whispered to Black Tom Carmichael, indicating with a glance of his eye the skulking figure of Ratler Webb, "Watch him."

Nodding in response to that whisper, Black Tom had strolled casually over, stationing himself directly behind Bear Cat. His face wore a calm benignity and his arms were crossed on his breast so peacefully that one would hardly have guessed the right hand caressed the grip of an automatic pistol and that the pistol had already been drawn half free from its hidden holster.

It happened that Ratler's hand, in his coat pocket, was also nursing a weapon. Ratler was biding his time. He had read into every face a contemptuous mockery for his surrender of the road to Turner Stacy that morning. In his disordered brain a fixed idea had festered into the mandate of a single word: "Revengeance."

Then when Bear Cat had drawn down on himself the wrath of an outraged camp-meeting Ratler thought his opportunity knocked. The crowd began to shift and move so that the focus of men's impressions was blurred. Availing himself of that momentary confusion, he stole a little nearer and shifted sidewise so that he might see around Black Tom Carmichael's bulking shoulders. He glanced furtively about him. Kinnard Towers was looking off abstractedly—another way. No one at front or back seemed to be noticing him.

Ratler Webb's arm flashed up with a swiftness that was sheer slight-of-hand and Black Tom's vigilant eye caught a dull glint of blue metal. With a legerdemain superlatively quick, Carmichael's hand, too, flashed from his breast. His pistol spoke, and Ratler's shot was a harmless one into the air. When the startled faces turned that way Ratler was staggering back with a flesh wound and Black Tom was once more standing calmly by. On the ground between his feet and Bear Cat Stacy's, as near to the one as the other, lay a smoking pistol.

"Bear Cat's done shot Ratler Webb!" yelled a treble voice, and again the agitated crowd broke into a confused roar.

Turner bent quickly toward Blossom and spoke in a tense

whisper. "Leave hyar fer God's sake. This hain't no place fer *you* right now!"

The girl's eyes leaped into instant and Amazonian fire and, as her chin came up, she answered in a low voice of unamenable obduracy

"So long es *you* stays, I stays, too. I don't aim ter run away."

The crowd was edging in, not swiftly but sullenly and there were faces through whose snarls showed such yellow fangs as suggested a wolf pack. Here and there one could see the flash of a drawn pistol or the glint of a "dirk-knife."

Then, coming reluctantly, yet keyed to his hard duty by the consciousness of Kinnard Towers' scrutiny, Jud White, the town marshal, arrived and laid a hand on Bear Cat's shoulder.

"I reckon," he said, licking his lips, "ye'll hev ter come ter ther jail-house with me, Bear Cat."

"What fer, Jud?" inquired Turner quietly, though the tawny fire was burning in his eyes. "I didn't shoot them shoots."

"Folks ses ye did, Bear Cat."

"Them folks lies."

A sudden crescendo of violent outcry interrupted their debate. Through it came shouts of: "Kill ther blasphemer!" "String him up!"

With a sudden flash of sardonic humor in his eyes Bear Cat suggested softly: "I reckon, Jud, hit's yore duty ter kinderly protect yore prisoner, hain't hit?"

A cold sweat broke out over the face of the town officer and as he stood irresolute, the crowd, in which mob passion was spreading like flames in dry grass, swayed in a brief indicision—and in that moment Brother Fulkerson stood forward, raising his arms above his head.

"Brethren," he cried in a voice that trembled, "I implores ye ter listen ter me. I hain't never lied ter ye afore now,

an' unless my labors hev been fer naught, I des'arves ter be h'arkened to."

Curiosity prevailed and the din subsided enough to let the evangelist be heard.

"I was standin' right hyar by Bear Cat Stacy when them shots war fired," Fulkerson went on earnestly, "an' I swears ter ye, with Almighty God fer my witness, thet he didn't hev nothin' more ter do with hit then what I did."

As he paused a sarcastic voice from the crowd demanded: "Will ye swear he didn't aim ter break up ther meetin' neither?"

"Let me answer that question," shouted Bear Cat Stacy, stepping defiantly forward.

There was peril in that interruption, and the young man knew it. He realized that only a savage, cat-and-mouse spirit of prolonging excitement had, so far, held in leash the strained wrath of a crowd worked already to frenzy. But the mountaineer loves oratory of any sort, and a lynching need not be hurried through. They would have listened to Brother Fulkerson—but would they give *him* a hearing?

For a moment Bear Cat stood there, sweeping them with a gaze that held no fear and a great deal of open scorn. The effrontery of his attitude, the blaze of his eyes and even the rumors of his charmed life were having their effects. Then he spoke:

"Any man thet charges me with blasphemin' lies! Brother Fulkerson hes done toiled his life away amongst ye—an' ye skeercely heeds his preachin'. I believes these fellers thet calls themselves God's sarvents ter be false prophets. Instid of the light of knowledge, they offers ye ther smoke of ign'rance. They hev 'lowed thet they kin work miracles. Ef they kin, why don't they? Ef they kain't they lies an' sich a lie as thet air blasphemy. I called on 'em ter make good thar brag—an' now I calls on 'em ergin! Let's see a miracle."

He ended and, as the voice of the crowd rose once more,

this time a shade less unanimous in tone, a strange thing happened. About Bear Cat Stacy and the town marshal appeared a little knot of rifle-armed men, and coming to their front, Kinnard Towers bellowed:

"Men! Listen!"

They looked at his face and his guns—and listened.

"I was standin' whar I could see this whole matter," asserted Towers. "Bear Cat Stacy never drawed nor fired no weepin. My friend Tom Carmichael shot Ratler Webb in *dee*fense of his life. Ratler shet a shoot, too. I counsels ther town marshal not ter jail Bear Cat Stacy, an' I counsels ther rest of ye ter settle down ergin ter quiet. Mebby Bear Cat oughtn't ter hev interrupted ther preachin', but whoever aims ter harm him must needs take him away from me!"

Over the sea of faces ran a wave of amazement sounding out in a prolonged murmur. Here was the incredible situation of a Towers leader vouching for and protecting a Stacy chieftain. Feudal blood tingled with the drama of that realization.

Varied excitements were breaking the drab monotony of life today for Marlin Town! A voice shouted, "I reckon Ratler needs a leetle shootin' anyhow," and the sally was greeted with laughter. The tide had turned.

On Bear Cat's face, though, as he wheeled to his powerful rescuer was a mingling of emotions; surprise blended with a frown of unwillingly incurred obligation.

"I'm obleeged ter ye, Kinnard Towers," he said dubiously, "but I reckon I could hev keered fer myself. I hain't seekin' ter be beholden ter ye."

The florid man laughed. "Ye hain't none beholden ter me, son," was his hearty disclaimer. "A man likes ter testify ter ther truth when he sees somebody falsely accused, thet's all."

Brother Fulkerson and his daughter started back to Little Slippery that same evening, meaning to spend the night with

friends a few miles from town. After bidding them farewell at the edge of the town, Henderson and Bear Cat strolled back together toward the shack tavern where Jerry had his quarters. The younger man's eyes were brooding, and suddenly he broke out in vehement insurgency:

"I reckon I was a fool down thar by ther river—but I couldn't hold my peace deespite all my effort. Hyar's a land dry-rottin' away in ign'rance—an' no man raisin' his voice fer its real betterment." His tone dropped and became gentle with an undernote of pain. "I looked at Blossom, standin' thar, with a right ter ther best thar is—an' I could foresee ther misery an' tribulation of all this makin' her old in a few years. I jest had ter speak out."

Henderson only nodded. He, too, had been thinking of Blossom, and he realized that wherever he went, when he left the hills, there was going to be an emptiness in his life. He was not going to be able to forget her. The shield which he had always held before his heart had failed to protect him against the dancing eyes of a girl who could not even speak correct English—the tilted chin of a girl who would not flee from a mob.

"Turner," he said, drawing himself together with an effort, "come over to the hotel with me. I'm going down to Louisville for a few days, and I want you to help me make out a list of books for Blossom and yourself."

Turner's eyes lighted. One man at least sought to be, in so far as he could, a torch-bearer.

As they sat talking of titles and authors the boy's face softened and glowed with imagination. Off through the window the peaks bulked loftily against the sunset's ash-of-rose. Both men looked toward the west and a silence fell between them, then they heard hurried footsteps and, without knocking, Jud White the town marshal, flung open the door.

"Bear Cat," he announced briefly, "yore paw bade me fotch ye ter him direct. The revenue hes got him in ther jail-house, charged with blockadin'."

CHAPTER XI

UNDER the impact of these tidings Turner Stacy came to his feet with a sudden transformation of bearing. The poetic abstraction which had, a moment ago, been a facial mirror for the sunset mysticism, vanished to be harshly usurped by a spirit of sinister wrath.

For several seconds he did not speak, but stood statuesquely taut and strained, the line of his lips straight and unbending over the angle of a set jaw.

The yellow glow of the sinking sun seemed to light him as he stood by the window into a ruddy kinship with bronze, awakening a glint of metallic hardness on cheekbone, temple and dilated nostril. It was the menacing figure of a man whose ancestors had always settled their own scores in private reprisal and by undiscounted tally, and one just now forgetful of all save his heritage of blood.

Then the strained posture relaxed and Bear Cat Stacy inquired in a tone of dead and impersonal calm:

"Mr. Henderson, hev ye got a gun?"

As Jerry shook his head, Bear Cat wheeled abruptly on Jud White: "Lend me yore weepin, Jud," he demanded with a manner of overbearing peremptoriness.

"I'd love ter obleege ye, Bear Cat," haltingly parried the officer, "but I kain't hardly do hit—lawfully."

Volcanic fires burst instantly in the eyes where they had been smoldering, until from them seemed to spurt an outpouring of flame and the voice of command was as explosive as the rending thunders that release a flow of molten lava.

"Don't balk me, Jud," Stacy cautioned. "I'm in dire

haste. Air ye goin' ter loan me thet gun of yore own free will or hev I got ter take hit offen ye?"

The town marshal glanced backward toward the exit, but with leopard swiftness Bear Cat was at the door, barring it with the weight of his body, and his breath was coming with deep intake of passion. After an irresolute moment, White surrendered his automatic pistol.

But as Turner gripped the knob, Jerry Henderson laid a deterring hand on his shoulder. "Just a moment, Bear Cat," he said quietly. Somewhat to his surprise the younger man paused and, as he turned his face questioningly to the speaker, some part of its fury dissolved.

"This is a time, Turner, when it's mighty easy to make a mistake," went on the promoter earnestly. "If your father sent for you, it's pretty certain that he wants to speak to you before you take any step."

"Thet's identically what he bade me caution ye, Bear Cat," echoed White. "He 'lowed thar'd be time enough fer reprisal later on."

"Mr. White," Henderson demanded as he turned and fronted the marshal with a questioning gaze, "before he goes over there, I want you to give me your hand that this isn't a scheme to get Bear Cat Stacy in the jail under false pretenses, so that he can be more easily arrested."

"An' answer thet honest," Turner warned vehemently, "because ef I don't walk outen thet jail-house es free es I goes inter hit, you won't never leave hit alive yoreself, Jud. How comes hit ther revenue didn't seek ter arrest me, too?"

"So help me Almighty God, men," the voice of the officer carried conviction of its sincerity. "I came over hyar only bearin' tidin's from Lone Stacy. I hain't aidin' no revenue. I heered Mark Tapper 'low thet he hedn't no charge ter mek ergin ye jest now."

"In that case," declared Henderson, assuming the rôle of spokesman, "we'll both go with you to the jail. Bear Cat

will give me the gun, since he can't go in unsearched, and you will remain with me, unarmed, as a hostage until he comes out."

"Thet satisfies me, all right," readily agreed the town marshal.

The jail-house at Marlin Town squats low of roof and uncompromising in its squareness to the left of the Court-house; hardly more than a brick pen, sturdily solid and sullenly unlovely of façade.

When father and son met in the bare room where one rude chair was the only furnishing save for a tin basin on a soap-box, the fire of renewed wrath leaped in Turner's eyes and he spoke with a tremor of voice:

"I reckon ye knows full well, pap, thet I don't aim ter let ye lay hyar long. I aims ter tek ye outen hyar afore sun-up—ef I hes ter take ye single-handed!"

The sunset was fading and in the bleak cell there was a grayness relieved only by the dim light from a high, barred slit that served as a window. The two men had to peer intently at each other through widened pupils to read the expression of lips and eyes.

Old Lone Stacy smiled grimly.

"I'm obleeged ter ye, son." His response was quiet. "An' I knows ye means what ye says, but jest now ye've got ter let *me* decide whether hit's a fit time ter wage war—or submit."

"Submit!" echoed the son in blank amazement. "Ye don't aim ter let 'em penitenshery ye ergin, does ye?"

Laying a soothing hand on the arm that shook passionately, the senior went on in a modulated voice.

"I've done studied this matter out, son, more ca'mly then you've hed time ter do yit—an' I discerns how ye kin holp me best. Sometimes hit profits a man more ter study ther fox then ther eagle."

The boy stood there in the half light, finding it bitter to stomach such passive counsel, but he gulped down his rising

gorge of fury and forced himself to acquiesce calmly, "I'm hearkenin' ter ye."

"Ther revenue 'lowed thet he war plumb obleeged ter jail me," went on the elder moonshiner evenly, "because tidin's hes done reached ther men up above him."

"I aims ter compel Mark Tapper ter give me ther names of them damn' tale-bearers," exploded Bear Cat violently, "an' I'm a-goin' ter settle with him an' them, too, in due course."

But again Lone Stacy shook his head.

"Thet would only bring on more trouble," he declared steadfastly. "Mark Tapper made admission thet he hes a weak case, an' he said thet ef I went with him peaceable he wouldn't press hit no further then what he war compelled ter. He 'lowed he hedn't no evi*dence* erginst *you*. I don't believe he's seed our still yit an' ef ye heeds my counsel, he won't never see hit."

"What does ye counsel then? I'm a-listenin'."

Lone Stacy's voice cast off its almost conciliating tone and became one of command. "I wants thet ye shell ride back over thar es fast es a beast kin carry ye—an' git thar afore ther revenue. I wants thet ye shell move thet still into a place of safe concealment erginst his comin'. I wants thet 'stid of tryin' ter carcumvent him ye sha'n't be thar at all when he comes."

"Not be thar?" The words were echoed in surprise, and the older head bowed gravely.

"Jist so. Ef they don't find ther copper worm ner ther kittle—an' don't git ye ter testify ergin me, I've still got a right gay chanst ter come cl'ar."

"Does ye 'low," demanded the son with deeply hurt pride, "that anybody this side of hell-a-poppin' could fo'ce me ter give testimony ergin my own blood?"

Again the wrinkled hand of the father fell on the shoulder of his son. It was as near to a caress as his undemonstrative nature could approach.

"I wouldn't hev ye perjure yoreself, son—an' without ye did thet—ye'd convict me—ef ye was thar in Co'te."

Turner glanced up at the narrow slit in the brick wall through which now showed only a greenish strip of pallid sky. His lips worked spasmodically. "I come over hyar resolved ter sot ye free," he said slowly, "ter fight my way outen hyar an' take ye along with me—but I'm ready ter heed yore counsel."

"Then ride over home es fast es ye kin go—an' when ye've told yore maw what's happened, an' hid ther still, take Lee along with ye an' go cl'ar acrost inter Virginny whar no summons sarver kain't find ye. Stay plumb away from hyar till I sends ye word. Tell yore maw where I kin reach ye, but don't tell me. I wants ter swear I don't know."

Bear Cat hesitated, then his voice shook with a storm of protest.

"I don't delight none thet ye should go down thar an' sulter in jail whilst I'm up hyar enjoyin' freedom."

The older man met this impetuous outburst with the stoic's fine tranquillity.

"When they tuck me afore," he said, "I left yore maw unprotected behind me an' you was only a burden on her then. Now I kin go easy in my mind, knowin' she's got you." The prisoner's voice softened. "She war a mighty purty gal, yore maw, in them times. Right sensibly Blossom Fulkerson puts me in mind of her now."

Lone Stacy broke off with abruptness and added gruffly: "I reckon ye'd better be a-startin' home now—hit's comin' on ter be nightfall."

As Turner Stacy went out he turned and looked back. The cell was almost totally dark now and its inmate had reseated himself, his shoulders sagging dejectedly. "I'll do what he bids me now," Bear Cat told himself grimly, "but some day thar's a-goin' ter be a reckonin'."

On his way to the livery stable he met Kinnard Towers

on foot but, as always, under escort. Still stinging under the chagrin of an hereditary enemy's gratuitous intervention in his behalf and a deep-seated suspicion of the man, he halted stiffly and his brow was lowering.

"Air these hyar tidin's true, Bear Cat? I've heerd thet yore paw's done been jailed," demanded Kinnard solicitously, ignoring the coldness of his greeting. "Kin I holp ye in any fashion?"

"No, we don't need no aid," was the curt response. "Ef we did we'd call on ther Stacys fer hit."

Towers smiled. "I aimed ter show ye this a'tternoon thet I *felt* friendly, Turner."

The manner was seemingly so sincere that the young man felt ashamed of his contrasting churlishness and hastened to amend it.

"I reckon I hev need ter ask yore pardon, Kinnard. I'm sore fretted about this matter."

"An' I don't blame ye neither, son. I jest stopped ter acquaint ye with what folks says. This hyar whole matter looks like a sort of bluff on Mark Tapper's part ter make a good showin' with ther govern*ment*. He hain't hardly got nothin' but hearsay ter go on—unless he kin make *you* testify. Ef ye was ter kinderly disappear now fer a space of time, I reckon nothin' much wouldn't come of hit."

"I'm obleeged ter ye Kinnard. Paw hes don' give me ther same counsel," said Bear Cat, as he hurried to the stable where he parted with Jerry Henderson after a brief and earnest interview.

It was with a very set face and with very deep thoughts that Bear Cat Stacy set out for his home on Little Slippery. He rode all night with the starlight and the clean sweep of mountain wind in his face, and at sunrise stabled his mount at the cabin of a kinsman and started on again by a short cut "over the roughs" where a man can travel faster on foot.

When eventually he entered the door of his house his

mother looked across the dish she was drying to inquire, "Where's yore paw at?"

He told her and, under the sudden scorn in her eyes, he flinched.

"Ye went down thar ter town with him," she accused in the high falsetto of wrath, "an' ye come back scot free an' abandoned him ter ther penitenshery an' ye didn't raise a hand ter save him! Ef hit hed of been me I'd hev brought him home safe or I wouldn't of been hyar myself ter tell of hit!"

Bear Cat Stacy went over and took the woman's wasted hands in both of his own. As he looked down on her from his six feet of height there came into his eyes a gentleness so winning that his expression was one of surprising and tender sweetness.

"Does ye 'low," he asked softly, "that I'd hev done *thet* ef he hadn't p'intedly an' severely bid me do hit?"

He told her the story in all its detail and as she listened no tears came into her eyes to relieve the hard misery of her face. But when he had drawn a chair for her to the hearth and she had seated herself stolidly there, he realized that he must go and remove the evidence which still remained back there in the laurel thickets. He left her tearless and haggard of expression, gazing dully ahead of her at the ashes of the burned-out fire; the gaunt figure of a mountain woman to whom life is a serial of apprehension.

When he came back at sunset she still sat there, bending tearlessly forward, and it was not until he had crossed the threshold that he saw another figure rise from its knees. Blossom Fulkerson had been kneeling with her arms about the shrunken shoulders—but how long, he did not know.

"Blossom," he said that evening as he was starting away into banishment across the Virginia boundary, "I don't know how long I'm a-goin' ter be gone, but I reckon you knows how I feels. I've done asked Mr. Henderson ter look atter ye, when he comes back from Louisville. He aims ter see

ter hit that paw gits ther best lawyers ter defend him while he's thar."

"I reckon then," replied the girl with a faith of hero-worship which sent a sharp paroxysm of pain into Bear Cat's heart, "thet yore paw will mighty sartain come cl'ar."

They were standing by the gate of the Stacy house, for Blossom meant to spend that night with the lone woman who sat staring dully into the blackened fireplace. To the lips of the departing lover rose a question, inspired by that note of admiration which had lent a thrill to her voice at mention of Jerry Henderson, but he sternly repressed it.

To catechize her love would be disloyal and ungenerous. It would be a wrong alike to her whom he trusted and to the man who was his loyal friend—and hers. But in his heart, already sore with the prospect of exile, with the thought of that dejectedly rocking figure inside and the other figure he had left in the neutral grayness of the jail cell, awakened a new ache. He was thinking how untutored and raw he must seem now that his life had been thrown into the parallel of contrast with the man who knew the broad world of "down below" and even of over-seas. If to Blossom's thinking he himself had shrunken in stature, it was not a surprising thing —but that did not rob the realization of its cutting edge or its barb.

"Blossom," he said, as his face once more became ineffably gentle, "thar's ther evenin' star comin' up over ther Wilderness Ridges." He took both her hands in his and looked not at the evening star but into the eyes that she lifted to gaze at it. "So long es I'm away—so long es I lives—I won't never see hit withouten I thinks of *you*. But hit hain't only when I see *hit* thet I thinks of ye—hit's *always*. I reckon ye don't sca'cely realize even a leetle portion of how much I loves ye." He fell for a space silent, his glance caressing her, then added unsteadily and with an effort to smile, "I reckon thet's jest got ter be a secret a-tween ther

Almighty, Who knows everything—an' me thet don't know much else but jest *thet!*"

She pressed his hands, but she did not put her arms about him nor offer to kiss him, and he reflected rather wretchedly that she had done that only once. Though it might be ungenerous to think of it, save as a coincidence, that one time had been before Jerry Henderson had been on the scene for twenty-four hours.

Bear Cat Stacy, with the lemon afterglow at his back and only the darkness before his face, was carrying a burdened spirit over into old Virginia, where for the first time in his life he must, like some red-handed murderer, "hide out" from the law.

Kinnard Towers felt that his plans had worked with a well-oiled precision until the day after Lone Stacy's arrest, when he awoke to receive the unwelcome tidings that Jerry Henderson had taken the train at four o'clock that morning for Louisville.

For a moment black rage possessed him, then it cleared away into a more philosophical mood as his informant added, "But he 'lowed ter several folks thet he aimed ter come back ergin in about a week's time."

* * * *

On that trip to Louisville Jerry Henderson saw to it that old Lone Stacy should face trial with every advantage of learned and distinguished counsel.

Jerry and President Williams of the C. and S.-E. Railways knew, though the public did not, that the expenses of that defense were to be charged up to the road's accounts under the head of "Incidentals—*in re* Cedar Mountain extension."

Old Lone had been an unconscious sponsor during these months and his friendship warranted recognition, not only for what he had done, but also for what he might yet do.

But the promoter's stay in the city was not happy since

he found himself floundering in a quandary of mind and heart which he could no longer laugh away. He had heretofore boasted an adequate strength to regulate and discipline his life. Such a power he had always regarded as test and measure of an ambitious man's effectiveness. Its failure, total or partial, was a flaw which endangered the metal and temper of resolution.

On these keen and bracing days, as he walked briskly along the streets of the city, he found himself instinctively searching for a face not to be found; the face of Blossom Fulkerson and always upon realization followed a pang of disappointment. Unless he watched himself he would be idiotically falling in love with her, he mused, which was only a vain denial that he was already in love with her.

It was in their half-conscious pervasiveness, their dream-like subtlety, that these influences were strongest. When they emerged into the full light of consciousness he laughed them away. Such fantasies did not fit into his pattern of life. They were suicidally dangerous. Yet they lingered in the fairy land of the partially realized.

He wished that her ancestors had been among those who had won through to the promised land of the bluegrass, instead of those who had been stranded in the dry-rot of the hills. In that event, perhaps, her grandmothers would have been ladies in brocade and powdered hair instead of bent crones dipping snuff by cabin hearth-stones. All their inherent fineness of mind and charm, Blossom had—under the submerging of generations. The most stately garden will go to ragged and weed-choked desolation if left too long untended.

But he could hardly hope to make his more fashionable world see that. The freshness of her charm would be less obvious than the lapses of her grammar; the flash of her wit less marked than her difficulties with a tea-cup.

Blossom, too, of late had been troubled with a restlessness of spirit, new to her experience. Until that day last June

upon which so many important things had happened the gay spontaneity of her nature had dealt little with perplexities. She had acknowledged a deep and unsatisfied yearning for "education" and a fuller life, but even that was not poignantly destructive of happiness.

Then within a space of twenty-four hours, Henderson had made his appearance, bringing a sense of contact with the wonder-world beyond the purple barriers; she had prayed through the night for Turner and he had come to her at dawn with his pledge—and finally, she had confessed her love.

In short she had matured with that swift sequence of happenings into womanhood, and since then nothing had been quite the same. But of all the unsettling elements, the disturbing-in-chief was Jerry Henderson. He had flashed into her life with all the startling fascination of Cinderella's prince, and matters hitherto accepted as axiomatic remained no longer certain.

"Gittin' education" had before that meant keeping pace with Turner's ambition. Now it involved a pathetic effort to raise herself to Henderson's more complex plane.

She had sought as studiously as Jerry himself to banish the absurd idea that this readjustment of values was sentimental, and she had as signally failed.

These changes in herself had been of such gradual incubation that she had never realized their force sufficiently to face and analyze them—yet she had sent young Stacy away without a caress!

"I'm jest the same as plighted to Bear Cat," she told herself accusingly, because loyalty was an element of her blood. "I ain't hardly got ther right to think of Mr. Henderson." But she did think of him. Perhaps she was culpable, but she was very young. Turner had seemed a planet among small stars—then Jerry had come like a flaming comet—and her heart was in sore doubt.

When, on his return, Henderson dropped from the step

of the rickety day-coach to the cinder platform of the station at Marlin Town, he met Uncle Israel Calvert who paused to greet him.

"Wa'al howdy, stranger," began the old man with a full volumed heartiness, then he added swiftly under his breath and with almost as little movement of his lips as a ventriloquist. "Don't leave town withouten ye sees me fust—hit's urgent. Don't appear ter hev much speech with me in public. Meet me at ther Farmers' Bank—upsta'rs—one hour hence."

Jerry Henderson recognized the whispered message as a warning which it would be foolhardiness to ignore. Probably even as he received it he was under surveillance, so instead of setting out at once on foot, he waited and at the appointed time strolled with every appearance of unconcern into the Farmers' Bank.

At the same time Black Tom Carmichael happened in to have a two-dollar bill changed into silver, and overheard the cashier saying in a matter-of-fact voice, "Thar's been some little tangle in yore balance, Mr. Henderson. Would ye mind steppin' up to the directors' room an' seein' ef ye kin straighten it out with the bookkeeper. She's up thar."

With a smile of assent Henderson mounted the narrow stairs and Black Tom lighted his pipe and loafed with inquisitive indolence below.

CHAPTER XII

INSTEAD of a puzzled accountant Jerry found in the bare upper room the rosy-faced, white-haired man who had given him credentials when he first arrived in the hills, and who kept the store over on Big Ivy.

"I come over hyar on my way ter Knoxville ter lay me in a stock of winter goods," voluntered the storekeeper, "an' I 'lowed I'd tarry an' hev speech with ye afore I fared any further on." As he spoke he tilted back his chair, and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

Henderson lifted his brows in interrogation and the storekeeper proceeded with deliberate emphasis.

"Somebody, I hain't found out jest who—aims ter hev ye lay-wayed on yore trip acrost ther mounting. I felt obleeged ter warn ye."

"Have me way-laid," repeated Jerry blankly, "what for?"

Uncle Israel shook his silvery poll. "I hain't hardly got ther power ter answer thet," he said, "but thar's right-smart loose talk goin' round. Some folks laments thet ye 'lowed ter teach profitable farmin' an' ye hain't done nothin'. They 'lows ye must hev some crocked projeck afoot. This much is all I jedgmatic'lly knows. Joe Campbell was over ter Hook Brewer's blind tiger, on Skinflint, last week. Some fellers got ter drinkin' an' talkin' aimless-like an' yore name come up. Somebody 'lowed thet yore tarryin' hyar warn't a-goin' ter be tolerated no longer, an' thet he knowed of a plan ter *git* ye es ye crossed ther mounting whilst Lone Stacy an' Bear Cat was both away. Joe, bein' a kinsman of mine an' Lone's, told me. Thet's all I knows, but ef I was you I wouldn't disregard hit."

"What would you advise, Uncle Israel?"

"Does ye plumb pi'ntedly *hev* ter go over thar? Ye couldn't jest linger hyar in town twell ther night train pulls out an' go away on hit?"

Henderson shook his head with a sharp snap of decisiveness. "No, I'm not ready to be scared away just yet by enemies that threaten me from ambush. I mean to cross the mountain."

For a moment the old storekeeper chewed reflectively on the stem of his pipe, then he nodded his approval and went on:

"No, I didn't hardly 'low ye'd submit ter ther likes of thet without no debate." He lifted a package wrapped in newspaper which lay at his elbow on the table. "This hyar's one of them new-fangled automatic pistols and a box of ca'tridges ter fit hit. I reckon ye'd better slip hit inter yore pocket. . . . When I started over hyar, I borrowed a mule from Lone Stacy's house . . . hit's at ther liv'ry-stable now an' ye kin call fer hit an' ride hit back."

"I usually go on foot," interrupted Henderson, but Uncle Israel raised a hand, commanding attention.

"I knows thet, but this time hit'll profit ye ter ride ther mule. He's got calked irons on his feet an' every man knows his tracks in ther mud. . . . They won't sca'cely aim ter lay-way yer till ye gits a good ways out from town, whar ther timber's more la'rely an' wild-like. . . . Word'll go on ahead of ye by them leetle deestrick telephone boxes thet ye're comin' mule-back an' they'll 'low ye don't suspicion nothin'. They will be a-watchin' fer ther mule then . . . an' ef ye starts out within ther hour's time ye kin make hit ter the head of Leetle Ivy by nightfall."

The adviser paused a moment, then went succinctly on.

"Hit's from thar on thet ye'll be in peril. . . Now when ye reaches some rocky p'int whar hit won't leave no shoe-track, git down offen ther critter an' hit him a severe whack. . . . Thet mule will go straight on home jest as stiddy es ef ye war still ridin' him . . . whilst *you* turns inter ther la'rel

on foot an' takes a hike straight across ther roughs. Hit's ther roads they'll be watchin' an' *you* won't be on no road."

Jerry Henderson rose briskly from his chair. "Uncle Israel," he said feelingly, "I reckon I don't have to say I'm obliged to you. The quicker the start I get now, the better."

The old man settled back again with leisurely calm. "Go right on yore way, son, an' I'll tarry hyar a spell so nairy person won't connect my goin'-out with your'n."

As he passed the cashier's grating Henderson nodded to Black Tom Carmichael.

"Does ye aim ter start acrost ther mounting?" politely inquired the chief lieutenant of Kinnard Towers, and Jerry smiled.

"Yes, I'm going to the livery stable right now to get Lone Stacy's mule."

"I wishes ye a gay journey then," the henchman assured him, using the stereotyped phrase of well-wishing, to the wayfarer.

Gorgeous was the flaunting color of autumn as Henderson left the edges of the ragged town behind him. He drank in the spicy air that swept across the pines, and the beauty was so compelling that for a time his danger affected him only as an intoxicating sort of stimulant under whose beguiling he reared air-castles. It would be, he told himself, smiling with fantastic pleasure, a delectable way to salvage the hard practicalities of life if he could have a home here, presided over by Blossom, and outside an arena of achievement. In the market-places of modern activity, he could then win his worldly triumphs and return here as to a quiet haven. One phase would supply the plaudits of Cæsar—and one the tranquil philosophy of Plato.

But with evening came the bite of frost. The same crests that had been brilliantly colorful began to close in, brooding and sinister, and the reality of his danger could no longer be disavowed.

Twilight brought the death of all color save the lingering lemon of the afterglow, and now he had come to the head of Little Ivy, where Uncle Israel had said travel would become precarious. Here he should abandon his mule and cut across the tangles, but a little way ahead lay a disk of pallid light in the general choke of the shadows—a place where the creek had spread itself into a shallow pool across the road. The hills and woods were already merged into a gray-blue silhouette, but the water down there still caught and clung to a remnant of the afterglow and dimly showed back the inverted counterparts of trees which were themselves lost to the eye.

He might as well cross that water dry-shod, he reflected, and dismount just beyond.

But, suddenly, he dragged hard at the bit and crouched low in his saddle. He had seen a reflection which belonged neither to fence nor roadside sapling. Inverted in the dim and oblong mirror of the pool he made out the shoulders and head of a man with a rifle thrust forward. That up-side-down figure was so ready of poise that only one conclusion was feasible. The human being who stood so mirrored did not realize that he was close enough to the water's line to be himself revealed, but he was watching for another figure to be betrayed by the same agency. Henderson slid quietly from his saddle and jabbed the mule's flank with the muzzle of his pistol. At his back was a thicket into which he melted as his mount splashed into the water, and he held with his eyes to the inverted shadow. He saw the rifle rise and bark with a spurt of flame; heard his beast plunge blunderingly on and then caught an oath of astonished dismay from beyond the pool, as two inverted shadows stood where there had been one. "Damn me ef I hain't done shot acrost an empty saddle!"

"Mebby they got him further back," suggested the second voice as Jerry Henderson crouched in his hiding place. "Mebby Joe tuck up his stand at ther t'other crossin'."

Jerry Henderson smiled grimly to himself. "That was shaving it pretty thin," he mused. "After all it was only a shadow that saved me."

As he lay there unmoving, he heard one of his would-be assassins rattle off through the dry weed stalks after the lunging mule. The second splashed through the shallow water and passed almost in arm's length, but to neither did it occur that the intended victim had left the saddle at just that point. Ten minutes later, with dead silence about him, Jerry retreated into the woods and spent the night under a ledge of shielding rock.

He had lived too long in the easy security of cities to pit his woodcraft against an unknown number of pursuers whose eyes and ears were more than a match for his own in the dark. Had he known every foot of the way, night travel would have been safer, but, imperfectly familiar with the blind trails he meant to move only when he could gauge his course and pursue it cautiously step by step.

From sunrise to dark on the following day he went at the rate of a half-mile an hour through thickets that lacerated his face and tore the skin from his hands and wrists. Often he lay crouched close to the ground, listening.

He had no food and dared not show his face at any house, and since he must avoid well-defined paths, he multiplied the distance so that when he arrived on the familiar ground of his own neighborhood, his hunger had become an acute pain and his weariness amounted to exhaustion. Incidentally, he had slipped once and wrenched his ankle. Within a radius of two miles were two houses only, Lone Stacy's and Brother Fulkerson's. The Stacy place would presumably be watched, but Brother Fulkerson would not deny him food and shelter.

Painfully, yard by yard, he crept down the mountainside to the rear of the preacher's abode. Then on a tour of reconnaissance he cautiously circled it. There were no visible

signs of picketing and through one unshuttered window came a grateful glow of lamplight.

He dared neither knock on the door nor scratch on the pane, but he remembered the signal that had been Bear Cat Stacy's. He had heard the boy give it, and now he cautiously repeated, three times, the softly quavering call of the barn-owl.

It was a moonless night, but the stars were frostily clear and as the refugee crouched, dissolved in shadow, against the mortised logs of the cabin's corner, the door opened and Blossom stood, slim and straight, against the yellow background of the lamp-lit door.

She might have seemed, to one passing, interested only in the star-filled skies and the starkly etched peaks, but in a low voice of extreme guardedness she demanded, "Bear Cat, where air ye?"

Henderson remembered that Turner, too, was "hiding out" and that this girl had the ingrained self-repression of a people inured to the perils of ambuscade. Without leaving the cancellation of the shadowed wall he spoke with a caution that equaled her own.

"Don't seem to hear me . . . just keep looking straight ahead. . . . It's not Bear Cat. . . . It's Henderson . . . and they are after me. . . . So far I've escaped . . . but I reckon they're following." He had seen the impulsive start with which she heard his announcement and the instant recovery with which she relaxed her attitude into one of less tell-tale significance. "Thank God," breathed the pursued man, "for that self-control!"

He detected a heart-wrenching anxiety in her voice, which belied the picture she made of unruffled simplicity as she commanded in a tense whisper, "Go on, I'm hearkenin'."

"Go back into the house," he directed evenly. "Close the window shutters . . . then open the back door. . . ."

She did not obey with the haste of excitement. She was too wise for that, but paused unhurriedly, humming an ancient

ballade, as though the stresses of life had no meaning for her, before she drew back and closed the door.

Reappearing, at the window, she repeated the same convincing assumption of untroubled indolence as she drew in the heavy shutters; but a moment later she stood shaken and blanched of cheek at the rear door. "Come in hastily," she pleaded. "Air ye hurted?"

Slipping through the aperture, Henderson smiled at her. His heart had leaped wildly as he read the terror of her eyes: a terror for his danger.

"I'm not hurt," he assured her, "except for a twisted ankle, but it's a miracle of luck. Where's your father?"

No actress trained and finished in her art could have carried off with greater perfection a semblance of tranquillity than had Blossom while his safety hung in the balance. Now, with that need ended, she leaned back against the support of the wall with her hands gropingly spread; weak of knee and limp almost to collapse. Her amber eyes were preternaturally wide and her words came with gasping difficulty. She had forgotten her striving after exemplary grammar.

"He hain't hyar—he won't be back afore to-morrow noon. Thar hain't nobody hyar but me."

"Oh!" The monosyllable slipped from the man's lips with bitter disappointment. He knew the rigid tenets of mountain usage—an unwritten law.

A stranger may share a one-roomed shack with men, women and children, but the traveler who is received into a cabin in the absence of its men compromises the honor of its women.

"Oh," he repeated dejectedly, "I was seekin' shelter for the night. I'm famishin' an' weary. Kin ye give me a snack to eat, Blossom, afore I fares forth again?"

It was with entire unconsciousness that he had slipped back into the rough vernacular of his childhood. At that moment he was a man who had rubbed elbows with death and

he had reverted to type as instinctively as though he had never known any other life.

"Afore ye fares forth!" In Blossom's eyes blazed the same Valkyrie fire that had been in them as she barred his path to Bear Cat Stacy's still. "Ye hain't a-goin ter fare forth, ter be murdered! I aims ter hide ye out right hyar!"

Civilization just then seemed far away; the primal very near—and, in that mood, the hot currents of long-denied love for this woman who was defying her own laws to offer him sanctuary, mounted to supremacy. Such a love appeared as logical as a little while ago it had seemed illogical. Eagle blood should mate with eagle blood.

"But, little gal," Jerry protested. "ye're alone hyar. I kain't hardly tarry. Ef hit became known——"

"Thet's jest ther reason," she flashed back at him, "thet nobody won't suspicion ye *air* hyar an' ef ye're in peril hit don't make no differ ter me what folks says nohow. I aims ter safeguard ye from harm."

His eyes, darkly ringed by fatigue and hunger, held an even deeper avidity. He looked at the high-chinned and resolute face crowned with masses of hair which lamp-light and hearth-glow kindled into an aura and deep into amber eyes that were candid with their confession of love. Slowly Jerry Henderson put his question—a question already answered.

"I reckon ye knows what this means, Blossom. Why air ye willin' ter venture hit?"

Still leaning tremulously against the chinked wall, she answered with the thrill of feeling and purpose in her voice.

"I hain't askin' what hit means. I hain't keerin' what hit means. All I knows it thet ye're in peril—an' thet's enough."

Jerry caught her in his arms, crushed her to him, felt her lips against his lips; her arms clinging softly about his neck, and at last he spoke—no longer with restraint.

"Until tonight I've always fought against love and I thought I was stronger than *it* was, but I reckon that was

just because I've never really come face-to-face with its full power, before. Now I'm going out again."

"No! No! I won't suffer hit," she protested with fervent vehemence. "Ye're a-going' ter stay right hyar. Ye b'longs ter me now an' I aims ter keep ye—unharmed!"

Abruptly they fell silent, warned by some premonitory sense and, as they stood listening, a clamor of knocking sounded at the door.

Thrusting him into her bedroom and screening him behind a mass of clothing that hung in a small corner closet unenclosed, but deeply shadowed, she braced herself once more into seeming tranquillity and went to the front of the house. Then she threw wide the door.

"We wants ter hev speech with Brother Fulkerson," came the unrecognized voice of a stranger whose hat brim shielded his face in the darkness.

"He hain't hyar an' he won't be back afore midday termorrow," responded the girl with ingenuous composure. "I kain't hardly invite ye in—because I'm hyar all alone," she added with a disarming gravity. "Will ye leave any message?"

Out there among the shadows she heard the murmurs of a whispered consultation, and despite a palpitation of fear she bravely held the picture.

Then, partly because her manner carried conviction against suspicion, and partly because to enter would be to reveal identities, the voice shouted back: "No, thank ye, ma'am. I reckon we'll fare on."

CHAPTER XIII

BEFORE Henderson had come that night, Blossom had been trying to study, but the pages of her book had developed the trick of becoming blurred.

Two faces persisted in rising before her imagination; one, the reproachful countenance of Bear Cat, whom she ought to love whole-heartedly; the other, that of Henderson, whom she told herself she admired only as she might admire the President of the United States or the man who had written the dictionary—with distant and respectful appreciation.

"He *says* I'm all right," she mused, "but I reckon he *knows* in his heart that I ain't good enough fer him—ner fer his folks."

Tears sprang into her eyes at the confession, and her reasoning went upon the rocks of illogic. "In the first place," she irrelevantly argued, "I'm in love with Bear Cat—an' in the second to think about Mr. Henderson would be right smart like crying for the moon."

Then Henderson had come; had come asking refuge from danger. He had declared his love with tumultuous force—and it seemed to Blossom that, after all, the moon was hers without crying for it.

When she had fed him in silence, because of the possibility of lurking spies outside, they sat, unmindful of passing hours, before the roar of the stone hearth and as the man's arms held her close to him she let her long lashes droop over her eyes and surrendered her hair and lips to his kisses.

They had no great need of words, but sometimes she raised her lids and gazed steadfastly into his face, and as the carmine flecks of the blaze lighted her cheeks, the eyes were wide and unmasked, with a full, yet proud, surrender.

He thought that for this gift of flower-like beauty and love the abandonment of his stern opportunism was a cheap exchange. His eyes, too, were glowing with an ardent light and both were spared the irony of realization that afterward impulse must again yield to the censorship of colder considerations. There is nothing more real than an impossible dream—while it endures.

Once the girl's glance fell on a home-made doll, with a coarse wig of horse-hair, propped on the mantel-shelf. It was one of those crude makeshifts which mountain children call poppets, as our great-grandfathers' great-grandmothers called them puppets.

A shadow of self-accusing pain crossed Blossom's face. "Turney whittled that poppet fer me outen hickory wood when I was a jest a leetle gal," she whispered remorsefully, then added: "Turney 'lowed ter wed me some day."

Henderson reassured her with irrefutable logic.

"Turner wouldn't have you disobey your heart, Blossom. Only you must be sure what your heart commands."

"I *am* sure. I'm plumb dead-sartain sure!" she vehemently responded, though still in a suppressed voice.

They sat before the fire, alertly wakeful, in the shadow of impending danger until the first pale hint of dawn. Then Blossom went out with water pails, ostensibly busied about her early tasks but really on a journey of investigation.

Returning, satisfied of temporary safety, she said briefly and authoritatively: "Come on, hit won't do fer ye ter tarry hyar. They'll come back, sartain sure. Thar's a leetle cave back thar in ther rocks that's beknownst only to Turner an' me. Hit's dry an' clean an' thar's sweet water runnin' through hit. I'll fotch ye yore victuals every day—an' when the s'arch fer ye lets up a leetle, I'll guide ye acrost inter Virginny whar ye kin strike the railroad without goin' back to Marlin Town."

"If I were you, Blossom," suggested the man as they

What their words might be he could not tell—but their clinging embrace said enough

slipped out of the house before full daylight, "I wouldn't tell Brother Fulkerson anything about my hiding place. These men who seek my life are probably influential. If your father can truthfully deny any knowledge of my being near, it will save him embarrassment. I don't want to make enemies for him—and you."

The girl pondered this phase of the situation judicially for a moment, then nodded gravely: "I reckon thet's ther wisest way," she agreed.

For three days Blossom carried food across the steeps to the hidden man, then late one cold night, when again her father was away on some mission of kindness which would keep him from home for twenty-four hours or more, she appeared at the mouth of the cave and signaled to the refugee.

She had decided that the moment had arrived for making the dash with him across the Virginia border, and since she knew every foot of the way, it would be better to travel in the cover of darkness.

It was a long and tedious journey, and the girl led the way tirelessly through frost-rimed thickets with a resilient endurance that seemed incompatible with her slenderness.

When the rising sun was a pale disk like platinum, they had arrived on the backbone of a high ridge and the time had come for parting.

Below them banks of white vapor obliterated the valleys. Above them, in the misty skies, began to appear opalescent patches of exquisite color and delicacy. About them swept and eddied clean and invigorating currents of frosted air.

For a little while reluctant of leave-taking, they stood silent, and the argent shield of the sun burst into fiery splendor. Then the heights stood out brilliant and unveiled.

"I reckon," said Blossom falteringly, "hit's come time to bid ye farewell."

The man took her hands in his and held them lingeringly;

but with a sudden and passionate gesture Blossom withdrew them and threw her arms about his neck.

"But ye hain't a-goin' fer always? Ye aims ter come back ter me ergin in good time, don't ye?"

For a little while he held her tightly clasped with his lips pressed to her soft hair, then he spoke impetuously:

"I aims ter come back ter ye right soon."

"Ye mustn't come twell hit's safe, though," she commanded, and after that she asked softly: "Now thet we're plighted I reckon ye don't forbid me ter tell my pappy, does ye?"

Henderson's muscles grew suddenly rigid and beads of sweat moistened his forehead in spite of the frosty tang of the morning air.

The words brought back a sudden and terrifying realization; the renewed conflict of a dilemma. He was going out into the other world, leaving the dead reckoning of the primal for the calculated standards of modernity. He was plighted to a semi-illiterate! Yet as her breath came fragrantly from upturned lips against his temples, all that went down under a wave of passionate love.

"No, Blossom," he advised steadily, "don't tell him yet. There are things that must be arranged—things that are hard to explain to you just now. Wait until I come back. I've got to study out this attack from ambush so that I can know whom I'm fighting and how to fight. It may take time—and if I write to you, naming a place,—will you come to me?"

Gravely and with full trust she nodded her head. "I'll come anywhars—an' any time—to you," she told him, and the man kissed her good-bye.

* * * *

Turner Stacy's longing to see Blossom had driven him to the imprudence of breaking the restrictions of exile. After traveling by night and hiding by day it happened that he was breasting a ridge just at sunrise one morning on his way

to her house, when his alert gaze caught an indistinct movement through the hazy half-light of the dawn. He could make out only that two figures seemed coming west along the mist-veiled path and that they appeared to be the figures of a man and a woman.

Surprised to encounter travelers at so remote a spot at that hour, he edged cautiously into the underbrush and lay flat on a huge rock which overlooked the path from a low eminence at its right.

They had halted just beyond the range of hearing, but when with mountain suddenness, like a torn curtain, the half-light became full-light he froze into a petrified astonishment which seemed to have clutched and squeezed all the vitality out of his heart, and to have left his blood currentless.

The abrupt revelation of light had fallen on the bright hair of Blossom Fulkerson and the dark uncovered head of Jerry Henderson; and before the monstrous incredibility of the situation could be fully grasped, the girl, to whom he had bade farewell as his acknowledged sweetheart, had thrown her arms around the neck of the man to whose loyal care he had confided her, and that man was kissing her with a lover's ardor!

What their words might be he could not tell—but their clinging embrace said enough—and Blossom was giving her lips with eager willingness.

Bear Cat lay for a moment, sick, dizzy and motionless while a groan, which never reached his lips, spasmodically shook his chest and shoulders. Succeeding that paralyzed instant, a fever of unspeakable fury surged over him and while all the rest of his body stretched unstirring, his arms slipped forward and the muzzle of his rifle crept over the ledge of rock. But that, too, was only a response to instinct and the thumb halted in the act of cocking the hammer. His vengeance called not only for satisfaction but for glutting.

Henderson must die face to face with him, not by the

stealth of ambuscade, but by open violence to be administered with bare hands—realizing the cause of his punishment—dying by inches!

But as he was on the point of rising to confront them, something arrested him: the stupor of a man whose mind and heart had trusted so implicitly that they could not yet fully credit even the full demonstration of his eyes. This must, despite all its certainty, be some hallucination—some wide-eyed nightmare!

While the spell of his stunned heart held him in the thrall of inaction, Henderson and Blossom parted with slow reluctance and took up their opposite direction of journey.

Left alone, like a man sitting, shaken and demoralized, upon the broken débris of a wrecked universe, Turner stared ahead with a dull incredulity. But inaction was foreign to his nature and after a while he rose unsteadily to his feet. He turned and started at a swift stride which broke presently into a dog-trot along the way Henderson had taken; then he hesitated, halted and wheeled in his tracks.

"No!" he exclaimed. "No, by God, ef I meets up with *him* the way I feels now, I'll kill him afore he has ther chanst ter speak with me. I kain't govern myself. I aims ter let *her* tell hit to me her own self!"

So he altered his direction and went plunging westward.

A short route through broken rock and tangled brush enabled him to cut ahead of Blossom's course so that, turning an abrupt angle in the trail, the girl found him standing before her with clenched hands and a face so set and pale that she started back. It seemed to her that, instead of himself, it was his ghost which confronted her.

With a slow and stifled outcry, at the apparition, she carried her hands to her face, then broke into convulsive sobs.

"I didn't aim ter eavesdrop, Blossom," said Turner, his sternness wavering before her tears. "But I seed ye givin' yore lips ter Jerry Henderson back thar. Hit seems ter me

like I kin almost discern the stain of thet kiss soilin' em now. I reckon I ought rightfully ter hev speech with him fust—but I knowed I'd kill him ef I did—an' so I held my hand twell I'd done seed *you*."

They were both trembling, and the girl's hands came slowly away from a face pitifully agitated. Her voice was a whisper.

"Ye mustn't censure me, Turney," she huskily protested. "I'm plighted—ter *him*."

"Plighted!" The word broke from the man as explosively as an oath, then after a moment's silence she heard him saying, in a slow and stunned fashion: "I 'lowed thet ye war all but plighted to *me*."

"I knows—I knows, Turney," she pleaded desperately. "I wants thet ye should understand. I thought thet I loved ye—I *do* love ye better then ef ye war my own blood brother—but I didn't know afore now ther kind of love thet—thet——"

"Thet Jerry Henderson's done stole from me," he finished for her, in a voice she had never before heard on his lips. "Atter all I did make a mistake. Hit *war* him I should hev spoke with fust—an' I reckon hit hain't too late ter overtake him yit."

Her hands were clinging to his arms. "No, Turney," she sought to explain. "He didn't know hit an' I didn't know hit either, when ye left. Neither one of us wouldn't hev sought ter lie ter ye."

Bear Cat Stacy was only partly conscious of what she was saying. Before his eyes swam red spots of fury which blinded him. If there was any vestige of truth in his ugly suspicion that Blossom was being deceived or played with, the responsible man, trusted friend and admired preceptor though he had been, was Bear Cat's to kill—and must die!

So he stood, tensely strained of attitude and ashen of cheek while a murder light kindled afresh in his eyes, and Blossom seemed the wavering shape of a dream: the dream of every hope his life had known—now utterly unattainable.

Her fingers were clutching his taut arms yet she seemed suddenly withdrawn from his world, leaving it void.

But she was talking earnestly, beseeching, and with the strained effort of one striving to separate lucid voices from the chaotic din of a delirium, he gave painstaking heed. She told the story of Jerry's narrow escape from death and of her conducting him to a place of safe departure. Part of it only he understood through the crashing dissonance of tempest which still confused his brain.

The volcanic fires within him that were destined to bring earthquake and transition were licking consumingly at the gates of his self-control.

His whole life had been builded on a single dream: the dream of her love—and she had promised it. For that he had fought the one enemy that had ever mastered him, and had conquered. For that he had shaped his life. Now he had been robbed of everything!

"Don't ye see how hit is, Turney?" she pleaded. "Hit wasn't his fault ner hit wasn't my fault. . . . Hit jest had ter be! Ye sees how hit is, don't ye?"

"Yes, I sees—how hit is!" The response came dully, then with a nearer recovery of a natural tone he went on. "Anyways I reckon ye've got ther right ter decide atween us. I reckon yore heart's yore own ter give or withhold. Hit war ter me that ye pledged yoreself first. Yore first kiss was mine—an' ye suffered me ter hope an' believe." There was a strained pause, then he added: "But even ef I could hold yer erginst yore free will, I wouldn't seek ter do hit."

Blossom's contrite wretchedness was so sincere and her sympathy so inarticulate that his face presently changed. The bitter and accusing sternness died gradually out of it and after a grief-stricken moment gave way to a great gentleness —such a gentleness as brought a transformation and stamped his lips and brow with a spirit of renunciation.

"Thar was murder in my heart, jest at first, little gal,"

he assured her softly, "but I reckon atter all hit's a right-pore love thet seeks ter kill a man fer gainin' somethin' hit's lost hitself. He kin take ye down thar whar life means sich things as ye desarves ter enjoy. With me ye'd have ter endure ther same hardships thet broke my mother down. I wants above all else thet ye should be happy—an' ef I kain't make ye happy——" He paused abruptly with a choked throat and demanded: "When does ye aim ter wed?"

The girl flushed. She did not think Turner would accord a sympathetic understanding to her lover's somewhat vague attitude on that point, so she only answered. "He 'lows ter write ter me—ef so be he kain't come back soon."

"Write ter ye!" The militant scorn snapped again in his eyes, burning away their softness as a prairie fire consumes dry grass, in its first hot breath. "Write ter ye! No, by Almighty God in Heaven, ye says ye're plighted ter wed him! Ye've done suffered him ter hold ye in his arms. Mountain men comes ter fotch thar brides ter church—they don't send fer 'em ter journey forth an' meet 'em. In these hills of old Kaintuck men come to thar women! He's got ter come hyar an' claim ye ef he has ter fight his way acrost every league of ther journey—an' ef he *don't*——!" But Bear Cat broke off suddenly with a catch in his voice.

"I've got full trust, Turney," she declared, and her eyes showed it, so that the man forced himself to calmness again, and went on in a level voice.

"I aims ter see thet ye hes what ye wants, Blossom, ef I hes ter plumb tear ther hills down level by level ter git hit fer ye. I must be a-farin' back inter Virginny," he announced a moment later with a curtness meant to bulwark him against a fresh outburst of feeling.

Blossom raised her hands as if to detain him, then let them drop again with a pathetic gesture. Bear Cat picked up his hat which had fallen to the ground and stood crushing its limp brim in his clenched fingers. Finally he said, without

anger, but very seriously: "I wants thet ye should give me back my pledge—erbout drinkin'. Ye knows why I give hit ter ye—an' now——"

"Oh, Turner," she interrupted protestingly, "don't ask thet!"

"I'm obleeged ter ask hit, Blossom," he obdurately answered. "I reckon mebby I kin still win my fight with licker—but I mustn't be beholden by a bond thet's lost hits cause."

Tearfully she nodded her head. "I'll free ye if ye demands hit," she conceded, "but I aims ter go on a-prayin'."

* * * *

Jerry Henderson was not a scoundrel in a general sense nor had he hitherto been a weakling, but for once he was the self-governed man who has lost control of his life and fallen victim to vacillation. Surging waves of heart-hunger made him want to go recklessly back; to fight his way, if need be, through all the Towers' minions to Blossom's side and claim her as his promised bride.

Other and perhaps saner waves of tremendous misgiving beat with steady reiteration against those of impulse. He must live out most of his days among people to whom such an alliance would be stripped of all illusion; would resolve itself into nothing more than a mesalliance. For both of them it would eventuate in wreck—and so Blossom heard nothing from him and she tasted first fear, then despair.

At last Kinnard Towers either learned or guessed the truth; that Blossom had hidden Henderson out in the absence of her father and had aided his escape. He saw to it that the report gained wide currency in a land avid for gossip.

Whatever the condition of his love affairs, Jerry came up short against the realization that he could not indefinitely abandon his business. He must, in some way, demonstrate that he was not being effectively put to flight by feudal threats and so he carried his perplexities to Lone Stacy, who was

awaiting trial in the Louisville jail, and unbosomed himself in a full and candid recital.

The bearded moonshiner, gaunter than ever and with the haunted eyes of a caged eagle, listened with grave courtesy but with a brow that gradually knitted into an expression half puzzled and half sinister.

"I reckon Bear Cat'll feel right-sensibly broke up," he said slowly. "Ye've done cut him out with his sweetheart, endurin' his absence from home, and ther two of 'em's growed up without no other notion then thet of bein' wed some day."

Henderson was on the point of self-justification, but before he could speak the prisoner went thoughtfully on: "Howsoever, a gal's got a rather as to her sweet-heartin'—an' ef ye won her fa'r an' above-board, I reckon Turner kin be fa'r-minded, too. I was thinkin' of somethin' else, though. From what ye tells me hit looks like es ef all these things, my jailin' an' yore lay-wayin', is jest pieces of one pattern. Hit looks like *I* was brought down hyar so thet Kinnard Towers could git *you*. Ef I'd a-knowed erbout his warnin' ye off thet night ye came, I mout hev guessed hit afore now."

He rose and paced the floor of the room where prisoners were permitted to receive guests bearing special permits—under the chaperonage of a turnkey. Suddenly he halted and his eyes flared, though his voice remained low and tense.

"I'm a Christian an' a man of peace," he said ominously, "but ef what I suspicions air true I don't aim ter submit ter hit. Does ye want ter go back thar ter Little Slippery?"

"I do, indeed," replied Henderson eagerly. "And soon!"

"All right then. Ther Stacys hev still got some power acrost Cedar Mounting an' they aims ter exercise hit. I'll straightway send a letter ter my brother, Joe Stacy. Ef ye gits offen ther train in Marlin Town one week from terday, he'll be thar ter meet ye—an' he'll hev enough men thar with rifle-guns ter see ye through safe—an' hold ye safe, too."

"Joe Stacy," repeated Henderson, "I've never met him, have I?"

"I don't hardly believe ye hes. He dwells on Skinflint, but he'll know *you* when he sees ye."

Later that same day the turnkey, who had from time to time received certain courtesies from Mark Tapper, repeated the conversation to that officer, and within forty-eight hours a messenger relayed it verbally to Kinnard Towers.

"Ef thar's any way ter head off thet letter ter Joe, now," reflected the backwoods master of intrigue, "an' thet body-guard don't show up—I reckon we kin still compass what we failed in, ther first time."

* * * *

To the house in Virginia where Bear Cat was temporarily established came Lew Turner, a distant kinsman on an enterprise of cattle trading. The meeting was a coincidence though a natural one, since their host was a man who had migrated from Little Slippery and had long been known to both. Shortly the two sat alone in conversation, and Bear Cat demanded news from home.

"Wa'al thar hain't no welcome tidings ter give ye. They keeps puttin' off yore paw's trial jest ter frazzle him out, fer one thing," began the newcomer lugubriously. "Then Henderson come back from down below an' some fellers aimed ter lay-way him, so he sought refuge in Brother Fulkerson's dwellin'-house when ther preacher warn't thar. Blossom tuck him in outen charity an' the two of 'em spent ther night thar all alone by tharselves. Hit didn't become gin'rally known till after he'd got away safe, but then ther gossips started in tongue-waggin'."

"Hold on, Lew! By God Almighty, ye've done said too much," Bear Cat broke out with a dangerous note of warning, his eyes narrowing into slits of menacing glitter.

The man from home hastily hedged his statement. "Hit

warn't no fashion Blossom's fault. He'd done faithfully promised ter wed with her."

Bear Cat Stacy had risen eruptively out of his chair. He bent over the intervening table, resting on hands in which the knuckles stood out white. "Go on!" he commanded fiercely. "What next?"

"Thet's erbout all, save thet since thet time she's done been pinin' round like somebody sickenin' ter her death. Es fer ther preacher, he just clamps his mouth shet an' won't say nothin' at all. Howsoever, he looks like he'd done been stricken."

Bear Cat straightened up and passed a hand across his forehead. He was rocking unsteadily on his feet as he reached for his hat.

"Whar air ye a-goin', Bear Cat?" asked the kinsman, with a sudden fear for the consequences of his narrative.

"Whar am I 'goin'? God, He knows! Wharever Jerry Henderson's at, *thar's* whar I'm 'goin'—an' no man hed better seek ter hinder me!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE post-office at Possum Trot, which serves the dwellers along the waters of Skinflint, is housed in one corner of a shack store and the distribution of its mail is attended with a friendly informality.

Thus no suspicion was engendered when a neighbor of Joe Stacy's dropped in each day and regularly volunteered, with a spirit of neighborly accommodation, "I reckon ef thar's anything fer Joe Stacy or airy other folks dwellin' 'twixt hyar an' my house, I'll fotch hit over to 'em."

The post-master had no way of knowing that this person was an agent of Kinnard Towers or that, when one day he handed out a letter "backed" to Joe in the scrawl of Lone Stacy, it went not to its rightful recipient but to the Quarter-house.

Jerry Henderson, in due time, stepped from his day coach at Marlin Town, equally innocent of suspicion, and was pleased to see emerging from the raw, twilight shadows, a man, unfamiliar of face, whose elbow cradled a repeating rifle.

"I reckon ye be Jerry Henderson, hain't ye?" inquired a suave and amicable voice, and with a nod Jerry replied, "Yes —and you are Joe Stacy?"

The man, slight but wiry and quick of movement, shook his head. "No—my name's John Blackwell. Joe, he couldn't hardly git hyar hisself, so he sent me in his stid but I reckon me an' ther boys kin put ye over ther route, without *dee*fault."

As if in corroboration of this assurance Jerry saw shadowy shapes materializing out of the empty darkness and as he mounted the extra horse provided for him he counted the armed figures swinging easily into their saddles. There were eight of them. His personal escort was larger than that with which Towers himself traveled abroad.

But when the cortège swung at length into an unfamiliar turning Jerry was startled and demanded sharply: "Why are we leaving the high road? This isn't the way to Lone Stacy's house."

The man who had met him bowed with a reassuring calmness.

"No, but Joe 'lowed hit would be safer an' handier, too, fer ye ter spend ther night at his house on Skinflint. Hit's nigher an' all these men air neighbors of his'n. Ter-morrow you kin fare on ter Little Slippery by daylight."

With an acquiescent nod, Henderson relapsed into silence and they rode in the starlight without sound save the thud of cuppy hooves on muddy byways, the straining creak of stirrup straps and a clinking of bit-rings.

Finally the cavalcade halted at a crossing where the shadows lay in sooty patches and its leader detached himself to engage in low-voiced converse with someone who seemed to have been suddenly created out of the pitchy thickness of the roadside.

Soon Blackwell rode back and, with entire seriousness, made a startling suggestion.

"Right down thar, in thet valley, Mr. Henderson—whar ye kin see a leetle speck of light—sets Kinnard Towers' Quarterhouse. Would hit pleasure ye ter stop off thar an' enjoy a small dram? Hit's a right-chillin' night."

The railroad's agent had never visited that place of whose ill repute he had heard such bizarre tales, but in all this high, wild country, he thought, there was no other spot of which it so well behooved his party to ride wide. John Blackwell was lighting his pipe just then and by the flare of the match Henderson studied the face for a glint of jesting, but the eyes were humorless and entirely sober.

"I think we'd better give the Quarterhouse as wide a berth as possible," he answered dryly.

"Hits fer *you* ter say, Mr. Henderson," was the quiet rejoinder. "But I'll give ye Joe Stacy's message. From what his brother writ him Joe concluded thet Lone warn't aimin' ter start no needless strife with Kinnard Towers, but he aimed ter make hit p'intedly cl'ar thet ther Stacys was detarmined ter pertect ye, an' thet ye'd done come back hyar plumb open an' upstandin'."

"That's true enough," assented Jerry. "I'm not trying to hide out, but I don't see any profit in walking into the lion's den."

The guide nodded sympathetically. He seemed imbued with the excellent military conception of obeying orders and proffering no gratuitous counsel.

"Joe 'lowed thet ef things looked favorable hit mout be a right-bold sort of thing an' a right wise one, too, to stop in thar as ye rid by. Hit's a public tavern—an' hit would prove thet ye're hyar, with a bodyguard, neither seekin' trouble ner fearin' hit."

"Why didn't you suggest this before, Mr. Blackwell?" inquired Henderson to whom the very effrontery of the plan carried an appeal.

"Joe didn't want me ter risk even namin' hit ter ye twell we knowed how ther land lay over thar," came the prompt and easy response. "Ye seed me talkin' with a man out front thar jest now, didn't ye? Wa'al thet war one of our boys, thet come direct from ther Quarterhouse, ter bear me ther tidin's. Thar hain't more'n a handful of men thar now—an' half of 'em's our friends. I reckon ye hain't in no great peril nohow so long as we're all tergither—an' full-armed."

Henderson felt that already his prestige had suffered from an appearance of flight. Here was an opportunity ready to hand for its complete rehabilitation. The bold course is always the best defense, and his decision was prompt.

"Come on then. Let's go in."

At the long rack in front of the frowning stockade, as they

dismounted and hitched, were already tethered a half-dozen horses.

* * * *

Bear Cat Stacy, impelled by Lew Turner's news, traveled in a fever of haste. He meant to go as straight as a hiving bee to Marlin and if need be to follow Henderson to the lowlands of Kentucky. Henderson had compromised Blossom, by the undeviating standards of mountain code, and he must come back and marry her even if he had to be dragged out of the most conspicuous place in Louisville itself. Casting all considerations of precaution and safety to the winds, the lover, whose devotion called for self-effacement, sought only the shortest way, and the shortest way led past the Quarter-house.

When he was within a mile of the point where Towers' resort straddled the state line he met a mounted man with a lantern swinging at his pommel.

"I kain't tarry ter hev speech with ye, Sim," he said shortly, "I'm in hot haste."

Yet as the other drawled a question, Bear Cat did tarry and a cold moisture dewed his temples.

"Did ye know thet yore friend, Jerry Henderson, hed done come back?" inquired Sim, and Turner's limbs trembled, then grew stiff as saddle leather.

"Come back! When did he come? Whar is he now?" The questions tumbled upon each other with a mounting vibrance of impetuosity.

"I war a-ridin' inter the road outen a side path a leetle spell back when I heered hosses an' so I drawed up ter let 'em go by," the chance traveler informed him. "I reckon they didn't hardly discern me. I hadn't lit my lantern then, but one of 'em lighted his pipe with a match an' I *ree*cognized two faces. One was Mr. Henderson's an' one was Sam Carlyle's. I seed sev'ral rifles acrost ther saddles, too."

"Which way war they ridin'?"

" 'Peared like most likely they war makin' fer ther Quarter-house."

"I'm obleeged ter ye." And Bear Cat was gone again into the darkness.

When he had turned the first bend his walk broke into a run. His mind was racing, too. So Henderson had not only come back, but come back with a reversed allegiance. He was riding with a Towers bodyguard and bound for a Towers stronghold! The name of Sam Carlyle indicated that as definitely as if it had been the name of Black Tom Carmichael. In one way this dropping of all friendly pretense by Jerry made his own task clearer and easier—but it was the most hazardous thing he had ever undertaken. Single handed, he must go into the place where bloodshed was no novelty and take Henderson away, and he went at a run.

Presumably, Jerry Henderson would not stop long in the bar-room, but would be conducted to the presence of Kinnard Towers, and, with all his haste, Bear Cat's speed seemed to himself desperately slow.

He and his father had protected this ingrate against Towers' wrath, he bitterly reflected, and this was their requital. Their guest had used that hospitality to steal the love of Blossom and then to discard her. He had deceived her, compromised her, promised her marriage and fled in the face of danger. Lew Turner had said: "She's been pinin' round like somebody sickenin' ter her death!" That was what her full trust had come to—and if she had trusted that far her trust might have gone farther! Then finally from the secure distance of the city Henderson had made his terms with Kinnard Towers!

Now Blossom was going to be married—a heart-racking groan rumbled in his throat. Blossom's wedding! How he had dreamed of it from his first days of callow love-thoughts! He had fed his imagination upon pictures of the house he had meant to build for her down there by the river! To his

nostrils now seemed to come the sweet fragrance of freshly hewn timbers and sawed lumber; incense of home-making! A hundred times he had visualized himself—the ceremony over—riding proudly with his bride on a pillion behind him, as the mountain groom had always brought his bride, from her father's house to his own—and her own!

Now her honor required that an unwilling husband should be brought to her—her honor and her heart's bruised wish—and he, who had planned it all differently, must see the matter accomplished—to-night!

* * * *

Henderson and his guard had strolled with a fine assumption of carelessness into the barn-like resort and, as the handful of loiterers there recognized them, an abrupt silence fell and glasses, half-raised, were held for a moment poised.

From a huge hearth-cavern at one end of the room leaped the ruddy illumination of burning logs and fagots in the flaming proportions of a bonfire. Wreaths of blue and brown smoke floated in foggy streamers between the dark walls and up to the cobwebbed rafters. The lamps guttered and flared against their tin reflectors, reeking with an oily stench in the stagnation of the unaltered air.

Along one end of the place went the bar, backed by its shelves of bottles and thick glassware, and in each side wall gaped a door—one for each state. Besides a few hickory-withed chairs there were several even ruder tables and benches, riven with axe and adze out of wide logs, and supported by such legs as those of a butcher's block. But these furnishings were all near the walls—and the whole center area of the floor, with its white-painted boundary line, was as unencumbered as a deck cleared for action.

The momentary surprise which greeted the newcomers was for the most part fictitious—and carefully rehearsed, but of this Jerry Henderson had no knowledge.

He walked to the bar, followed by one or two of his

guardians, and extended a general invitation. "Gentlemen, it's my treat. What will you-all have?"

After the glasses had been filled and drained, Henderson went over and stood for a while in the grateful warmth of the booming hearth. He was looking on at this picture with its savor of medievalism—the ensemble that called to mind a Hogarth print, but soon he nodded to his guide who slouched not far from his elbow.

"I reckon we'd better fare on, Mr. Blackwell," he suggested evenly. "We've still got a journey ahead of us."

Blackwell seemed less impressed with the immediate urgency.

"Thar hain't no tormentin' haste," he demurred. "We're all right stiff-j'inted from ridin'. We mout as well limber up a leetle mite afore we starts out ergin."

Jerry's eyes clouded. He would have preferred finding a spirit of readier obedience in his body-guard, but it was best to accept the situation with philosophy. Accordingly he turned again to the bar, though this time he made only a pretense of drinking. Fresh arrivals had begun drifting in and the place now held more than a score. Among them were already several whose voices were thickening or growing shrill, according to their individual fashions of becoming drunk.

Jerry sought to reassure himself against the disquieting birth of suspicion, yet when he heard one of the newcomers address Blackwell as Sam instead of John, an ugly apprehension settled upon him and this foreboding was not allayed as he caught the response in a low and savage growl: "Shet up, ye fool!"

The temper of the motley outfit was rapidly growing boisterous, though he himself seemed ignored until, in turning, he accidently jostled a man whom he had never seen before to-night, and that individual wheeled on him with an abusive truculence. Henderson's gorge rose, but his realization was

now fully awake to the requirement of self-control, so with a good-natured retort he moved away.

Beckoning peremptorily to Blackwell, he started at a deliberate pace toward the door, but before he reached it, the staggering figure of the quarrelsome unknown overtook him and lurched drunkenly against him. Then Henderson felt a stunning blow in the face, and under its unexpected force he reeled back against the wall.

He was no longer in doubt. He had been beguiled here to be made the victim of what should appear an accidental encounter, and all that remained now was to sell his life at as punitive a rate as possible.

As he reached under his coat for the automatic pistol which was his sole remaining dependence, he caught in a sidewise glimpse the face of Sam Carlyle alias John Blackwell. It wore a sardonic smile and its lips opened like a trap to shout in a staccato abandonment of disguise. "Git him, boys! *Git* him!"

It was palpably enough a signal for which they had been waiting, like the pack-master's horn casting loose his hounds. Instantly the place burst into an eruption of confused and frenzied tumult. Henderson had a momentary sense of unshaven faces with lips drawn over wolfish fangs, of the pungent reek of gunpowder in his nostrils and, in his ears, the cracking of pistol reports—as yet sounding only in demonstration.

With a few steps more they would be swarming upon him, as a pack piles upon its defenseless quarry. But his own weapon spat doggedly, too, and for the brevity of an instant the rush wavered.

His assailants were crowding each other so hamperingly that the fusillade from the front was wild and, at first, ineffective. Those at the fore, cooled by a resolute reception and the sight of one of their number going down, with a snarl of pain, pressed forcibly back.

For the space of one quick breath, they afforded their victim a reprieve. He was groping, with his left hand outstretched, against the wall toward the nearby door, when he felt that arm grow numb and drop limp at his side. Through his left shoulder darted a sensation hardly recognized as pain.

The two doors had not been closed. It was unnecessary. Before the victim should reach either he would be riddled, and even if he gained one he would fall before he could mount and ride away. Since they had him at their mercy they could afford to toy with him.

No one saw the figure that had materialized on the threshold to which all the backs of the yelping crowd were turned. It had come unannounced from the outer darkness. It stood for a moment looking on and in that moment understood the only thing necessary to comprehend: that the man who must be married to-night, was being prematurely assassinated.

From his shadow of concealment at the door, this volunteer in the conflict thrust forward his rifle. His lean jaws were set and his eyes were full of a cold and very deadly light. It was the ringing voice of his repeater that announced him as it launched into the place so swift and fatal a sequence of messages that, to those inside, it appeared that they were being raked by a squad's volley.

The sharp challenge of the clean-mouthed rifle, multiplied by its echo, dominated the muffled belching of revolvers like thunder crashing through the smother of winds, and upon the drunken mob of murderers, the effect was both immediate and appalling. To a savage lust for violence succeeded panic and an uncontrollable instinct of flight.

A very different performance had been rehearsed in advance. It had contemplated a pretense of mêlée in which Jerry Henderson was to be killed—and no one else was to suffer. What had been staged as a bar-room brawl with an incidental murder had been switched without prior notice into

battle and siege, and as every head came about with eyes starting and jaws sagging, many dropped and lay prone on the floor to escape the scathe of flying lead. Utilizing the respite of diverted attention, Jerry Henderson overturned a heavy table, behind which he crouched. He was bleeding now from half a dozen wounds—and his only thought was to die fighting.

But that moment of terror-arrested inaction would not last, and before it was spent, Bear Cat Stacy had hurled himself with hurricane fury into the room, his rifle clubbed and flying, flail-like, about his head. The brief advantage of surprise must be utilized for the rush across the floor and, if it were to succeed, it must be accomplished before the boldest recovered their poise.

He must reach Henderson's side and the two must fight their way out shoulder to shoulder. Henderson must not die —just yet!

Turner Stacy covered half the distance by the sheer impetuosity of his onslaught, and reached the painted line of the state border, before a voice from the outskirts sought to rally the dismayed and disorganized forces with a rafter-rocking howl: "Bear Cat Stacy! *Git* him boys! Git 'em both!"

But the new arrival was not easy to "git." He seemed an indestructible spirit of devastation; a second Samson wielding the jaw bone of an ass and wreaking death among his adversaries. He hurled aside his rifle shattered against broken heads and caught up a heavy chair. He cast away the chair, carrying a man down with it as it flew, and fought with his hands.

The superstition of his charmed life seemed to have something more of verity, just then, than old wives' gossip.

Then the initial spell of panic broke and those who had neither fled nor fallen swarmed grimly upon him. The pistols broke out again in their ragged yelping, but Bear Cat seemed

everywhere at once, and always at such close grips with one or more adversaries that lead could not reach him save through the flesh of his assailants. And while this deadly romp went forward, Henderson rose and ducked like a jack-in-the-box behind his massive obstruction, sniping at such as fell back from the core of the conflict.

But preponderating numbers must ultimately prevail and neither Stacy nor Henderson could have outlasted the minute in that inferno, had not Sam Carlyle undertaken to hurl himself on Bear Cat when, for a moment, the single combatant had wrenched himself free of the struggling mass.

Carlyle dived instead of standing off and shooting, and with the swiftness of a leopard's stroke Turner whipped out his pistol and received the Towers henchman on its muzzle.

"Hands high!" he ordered in a voice that crackled with pleasure at this miracle of deliverance, and Carlyle, realizing too late his blunder, stretched his arms overhead. Then giving back step by step and holding the would-be assassin as a shield at his front, Bear Cat edged to the corner of the table. He was bleeding, too, not in one place but in many.

"Git behind me, Henderson," he commanded briefly, "an' make yore way ter ther door!"

Roused to a fictitious strength by the infection of his rescuer's prowess, the wounded promoter sought to gain his feet, but his legs gave way under the seeming burden of tons. "I'm not just wounded," he mused, "I'm riddled and shredded." Sinking back, he said gaspingly, "Save yourself, Stacy. . . . I reckon . . . I'm done for."

But Bear Cat, crouching with his pistol thrust against the breast of his human shield, snapped out his words with a resolve which appeared ready to assume command over death itself.

"Do what I tells ye! Ye kain't die yit—ye've got to endure fer a spell. I hain't done with ye!"

Pulling himself painfully up by the table's edge with his

Then giving back step by step, Bear Cat edged to the corner of the table

one sound arm, Jerry made a panting and final effort, but, as he struggled, part of his body became exposed and that was the signal for several desultory shots. He fell back again, bleeding at the mouth, and the spot where he collapsed was reddened with the flow from his wounds.

Bear Cat Stacy's voice ripped out again in a furious roar.

"Quit shootin'!" he yelled. "One more shoot an' I kills Sam Carlyle in his tracks. I warns ye!"

Carlyle, turned his head, too, and bellowed across his shoulder.

"Fer God's sake boys, hold up! He means hit!"

As the racket subsided, Stacy knelt, still covering his hostage and said briefly to Jerry, "Hook yore arm round my shoulders. I'll tote ye."

He came laboriously to his feet again with his clinging burden of bleeding freight,—and abruptly Kinnard Towers appeared in the other door. His voice was raised in a semblance of rage, corroborated by an anger so well-simulated that it made his face livid.

"What manner of hell's deviltry air all this?" he thundered. "Who attacked these men in my place? By God, I don't 'low ter hev my house turned into no murder den." His minions, acting on his orders, knew their chief too well to argue, and as they fell shamefacedly silent, Kinnard shouted to Bear Cat.

"Son, let me succor ye. He looks badly hurted."

"Succor, hell!" retorted Bear Cat grimly. "You an' me will talk later. Now ef any feller follers me, I aims ter kill this man ye hires ter do yore murderin'."

At the hitching-rack several horses still stood tethered. There was need for haste, for one fugitive was perhaps bleeding to death and the other was wounded and exhausted. Some of the scattered murderers might be already waiting, too, in the shadows of the thickets.

Then for the first time Bear Cat spoke to Henderson of the mission that had brought him there.

"Now ye've got ter git up an' ride ter Brother Fulkerson's house," he said, with a bitter curtness. "Ye're a-goin' ter be married ter-night."

"Married! To-night!" Jerry was hanging limp in the arms of his rescuer. His senses were reeling with pain and a weakness which was close to coma, but at the tone he raised his lids and met the glittering eyes that bent close, feeling a hot breath on his cheeks. This was the face of the man who had recklessly walked into a death trap to save him, but in its implacable fixity of feature there was now no vestige of friendliness.

"Married!" echoed the plunger feebly. "No, buried. I'm mortally hurt, I tell you. . . . I'm dying. Just put me down and save yourself while . . . you can."

But Bear Cat Stacy was lifting him bodily to the saddle and holding him in place.

"Dying?" he scornfully repeated. "I hopes ter God ye air, but afore ye dies ye're agoin' ter be married. Maybe I'm dying, too—I don't know—but I aims ter last long enough ter stand up with ye first."

CHAPTER XV

KINNARD TOWERS had spent that evening in his house at the distance of a furlong from the stockaded structure wherein the drama of his authorship was to be staged and acted. The cast, from principals to supernumeraries, having been adequately rehearsed in lines and business, his own presence on the scene would be not only unnecessary but distinctly ill advised, and like a shrinkingly modest playwright, he remained invisible. The plot was forcible in its direct simplicity. A chance disturbance would spring out of some slight pretext—and Henderson, the troublesome apostle of innovation, would fall, its accidental and single victim. When death sealed his lips the only version of the affair to reach alien ears would be that dictated by Towers himself: the narrative of a regrettable brawl in a rough saloon. Against miscarriage, the arrangements seemed airtight, and there was need that it should be so for, desirable as was the elimination of Jerry's activities, that object would not have warranted recklessly fanning into active eruption the dormant crater of Stacy animosities. However, with Lone Stacy in duress and Turner Stacy in hiding beyond the state border, the hereditary foes were left leaderless—and would hardly rise in open warfare. Moreover, Kinnard meant to insure himself against contingencies by hastening to such prominent Stacys as might be in communication with the absentees and avowing, with deep show of conviction that, of all the turbulent affairs which had ever come to focus in his tavern, nothing had so outraged him as this particular calamity. He would appear

eager for active participation in hunting down and punishing the malefactors.

Of course, a scape-goat might be required, perhaps more than one, but there were men who could be well enough sacrificed to such a diplomatic necessity.

So during the first part of that evening, Kinnard sat comfortably by his hearth, smoking his pipe with contemplative serenity the while he waited for the rattle of firearms, which should announce the climax of the drama. He allowed to drop on his knees the sheaf of correspondence which had come to his hand through the courtesy of his nephew in the legislature. These papers bore the caption: C. and S. E. Railways Company: "*In Re*—Cedar Mountain extension," and they contained meaty information culled from underground and confidential sources.

Across the hearth from him, with bare feet spread to the blaze, sat the well-trusted Tom Carmichael—sunk deep in meditation, though his eyes were not entirely serene—nor cloudless of apprehension.

"'Pears like ther show ought ter be startin' up," complained Towers restively. "Ye seed 'em go inter ther Quarterhouse, ye said?"

Tom nodded.

"I watched 'em from ther shadders of ther roadside. They went in all right. They're inside now."

After a brief pause the lieutenant demanded querulously, "Ye've done tuck inter account thet ther killin' of this feller from Loneyville's goin' ter stir up them furriners down below, hain't ye, Kinnard? I wouldn't be none astonished ef they sent them damn' milishy soldiers up here ergin."

"Ease yore mind, Tom." Towers spoke with the confidence of the strategist who has, in advance, balanced the odds of campaign. "Ther railroad will kick up hit's heels—an' snort like all hell—but ther Co'te sets *hyar*—an' I carries ther Co'te in my breeches pocket."

After a moment he added, "The only people I'm a-fear'd of air ther Stacys—an' I've done arranged *thet*."

At last across the frosty, sound-carrying distance, came the spiteful crack of pistols, and Kinnard Towers leaned attentively forward in his chair.

"Them damn' fools air bunglin' hit, some fashion," he broke out wrathfully. "Thar hain't no sort of sense in a-stringin' hit out so long."

A momentary diminuendo of the racket was followed by the sharp, repeated bark of a rifle, which brought the intriguer violently to his feet.

"Hell's fiddle!" he ejaculated in sudden alarm. "They hain't finished hit up yit! I cautioned 'em special not ter use no rifle-guns—jest pistols, accidental like."

Hatless and coatless, he rushed out and made for the Quarterhouse, disquieted and alarmed by the din of a howling chorus which sounded more like uncertain battle than orderly and definite assassination.

Before his panting, galloping haste brought him to the stockade he caught, above the confused pandemonium, a yell of: "Bear Cat Stacy! *Git* him! Git 'em both!"

"Good God!" he muttered between grinding teeth. "Good God, them fools air startin' ther war ergin! I've got ter stop hit!"

If Bear Cat fell within the four walls of that house tomorrow would dawn upon a country-side disrupted in open warfare. So Kinnard appeared in the door, his face distorted with an ashen fury and sought, too late, to assume again the rôle of pacifist and rescuer.

As Bear Cat had gone stumbling out, bearing his burden of wounded and misused humanity, two men started forward keyed for pursuit.

"We kin still git 'em from ther brush," hazarded one, but with a biting sarcasm the chieftain wheeled on the volunteer.

"Stand where ye're at, ye fool! Ye've done flung away

ther chanst—an' plunged us all inter tribulation! Hain't I got no men thet hain't damned bunglers?"

He stood panting in a rage like hydrophobia.

"Thet Bear Cat, he hain't mortal noways!" whined a dishevelled youth who nursed a limp arm. "I seed his chest square on my pistol sights, not two yards' distant, an' I shot two shoots thet hed a right ter be deadeners—but ther bullets jest bounced offen him. Ye kin bleed him a leetle, but ye kain't in no fashion *kill* him."

Kinnard Towers stood looking about the débris of the place where shattered bottles on the shelves and grotesque figures cluttering the floor bore testimony to the hurricane that had swept and wrecked it.

"Them fools war mortal enough," he disdainfully commented. "I reckon ye'd better take a tally an' see what kin be done fer 'em."

* * * *

Under stars that were frostily clear, Bear Cat Stacy rode doggedly on, gripping in his arms the limp and helpless figure of Jerry Henderson. Beneath his shirt he was conscious of a lukewarm seeping of moisture as if a bottle had broken in an inner pocket and he recognized the leakage as waste from his own arteries.

Within his skull persisted a throbbing torture, so that from time to time he closed his eyes in futile effort to ease the blinding and confusing pain. With both arms wrapped about the insensible figure before him, and one hand clutching his pistol, rather from instinct than usefulness, he went with hanging reins. A trickle of blood filled his eyes and, having no free hand, he bent and dabbed his face against the shoulder of his human burden. Through all his joints and veins he could feel the scalding rise of a fever wave like a swelling tide. To his imagination this half-delirious recognition of sanity-consuming heat became an external thing which he must combat with will-power. So long as he could fight it down

from engulfing and quenching his brain, he told himself, he could go on. Failing in that, he would be drowned in a steaming whirlpool of madness.

The stark and shapeless ramparts of the hills became to his disordered senses hordes of crowding Titans, pressing in ponderously to smother and bury him. He felt that he must fend them off; hold back from crushing and fatal assault the very mountains and the pitchiness of death—for a while yet —until his task was finished.

Above all he must think. No man could defeat death, but, for a sufficient cause and with dauntless temper of resolution, a man might postpone it. He must win Blossom's battle before he fell. He swayed drunkenly in his saddle and gasped in his effort to breathe as a hooked fish gasps, out of water.

It seemed that on his breast lay all the massiveness of the rock-built ranges and at his reason licked fiery tongues of lunacy so that he had constant need to remind himself of his mission.

There was some task that he had set out to accomplish—but it wavered into shadowy vagueness. There were scores of mountains to be pushed back and a heavy, sagging thing which he carried in his arms, to be delivered somewhere—before it was too late.

His mind wandered and his lips chattered crazy, fever-born things, but to his burden he clung, with a grim survival of instinctive purpose. Sometimes an inarticulate and stifled sound came stertorously from the swollen lips of the weltering body that sagged across the horse's withers—but that was all, and it failed to recall the custodian from the nightmare shades of delirium.

But the night was keenly edged with frost and as the plodding mount splashed across shallow fords its hooves broke through a thin rime of ice. That same cold touch laid its restoring influence on Turner Stacy's pounding temples. His eyes saw and recognized the setting of the evening star—

and something lucid came back to him. To him the evening star meant Blossom. He remembered now. He was taking a bridegroom to the woman he loved—and the bridegroom must be delivered alive.

Jerking himself painfully up in his saddle, he bent his head. "Air ye alive?" he demanded fiercely, but there was no response. He shifted his burden a little and held his ear close. The lips were still breathing, though with broken fitfulness.

His fever would return, Bear Cat told himself, in intermittent waves, and he must utilize to the full the available periods of reason. Henderson would bleed to death unless his wounds were promptly staunched. Liquor must be forced down his throat if he were to last to Brother Fulkerson's house with life enough to say "I will."

Since the dawn when Bear Cat had given his pledge to Blossom he had always carried a flask in his pocket. He had done so in order that his fight should be one without any sort of evasion of issues: in order that the thirst should be met squarely and that whenever or wherever it attacked him he would have to face and conquer it with the knowledge that drink was at hand.

Now he felt for that flask and found that in the mêlée it had been shattered.

Rough and almost perpendicular leagues intervened between here and Brother Fulkerson's and there must immediately be some administration of first aid. The instinct of second nature came to Bear Cat's aid as he groped for his bearings.

Over this hill, a half mile through the "roughs," unless it had been moved of late, lay Dog Tate's blockade still. Slipping back of his saddle, onto the flanks of his mount, Turner lowered Henderson until he hung limp after the fashion of a meal-sack between cantle and pommel. He himself slid experimentally to the ground, supporting himself

against the horse while he tested his legs. He could still stand —but could he carry a man as heavy as himself?

"A man kin do whatsoever he's obleeged ter do," he grimly told himself. "This hyar's a task I'm plumb decreed ter finish."

The fever had temporarily subsided. His brain felt preternaturally clarified by the contrast, but the hinges of his knees seemed frail and collapsible.

He hitched the horse, and hefting the insensible man in his arms, staggered blindly into the timber.

Dog's place was hedged about with the discouragement of thickets as arduous as a *cheval de frise,* but Bear Cat's feet groped along the blind path with a surety that survived from a life of wood-craft. Once he fell, sprawling, and it was a little while before he could conquer the nausea of pain sufficiently to rise, gather up his weighty burden, and stumble on again.

"I'll hev abundant time ter lay down an' die ter-morrow," he growled between the clamped jaws that were unconsciously biting the blood out of his tongue. "But I've got ter endure a spell yit—I hain't quite finished my job."

At last he lifted his voice and called guardedly out of the thickets. "This is Bear Cat Stacy—I'm bad wounded an' I seeks succor!"

There was no reply, but shortly he defined a shadow stealing cautiously toward him and Dog Tate stood close, peering through the sooty dark with amazement welling in his eyes.

The gorge which Dog had chosen for his nefarious enterprise was a "master shut-in" between beetling walls of rock, fairly secure against discovery and now both the moonshiner and his sentinel brought their lanterns for an inquiry into this unexpected visit.

At first mute astonishment held them. These two figures were bruised, torn and blood-stained, almost beyond semblance to humanity. In the yellow circlet of flare that the lantern

bit out of the darkness, they seemed gory reminders of a slaughter-house. But much of the blood that besmeared Bear Cat Stacy had come from his weltering burden.

"I hain't got overly much time fer speech, Dog," gasped Turner between labored breaths. "We've got ter make Brother Fulkerson's afore we gives out. . . . Strip this man an' bind up his hurts es well es ye kin. . . . Git him licker, too!"

They staunched Henderson's graver wounds with a rough but not undeft speed, and when they had forced white liquor between his lips the faltering heart began to beat with less tenuous hold on the frayed fringes of life.

"Ef he lives ter git thar hit's a God's miracle," commented Dog. He passed the whiskey to Bear Cat, who thrust it ungraciously back as he repeated, with dogged reiteration. "He's got ter last twell mornin'. He's *got* ter."

When the prostrate figure stirred with a flicker of returning consciousness Turner's eyes became abruptly keen and his words ran swiftly into a current of decisiveness:

"Dog, yore maw war a Stacy—an' yore paw was kilt from ther la'rel. I reckon ye suspicions who caused his death?"

A baleful light glimmered instantly into the moonshiner's pupils; the light of a long-fostered and bitter hate. His answer was breathed rather than spoken.

"I reckon Kinnard Towers hired him killed. . . . I was a kid when he died, but my mammy give me his handkerchief, dipped in his blood . . . an' I tuck my oath then." He paused a moment and went on more soberly: "I've done held my hand . . . because of ther truce . . . but I hain't nowise forgetful . . . an' some day——"

Bear Cat leaned forward and laid an interrupting hand on the shoulder of the speaker, to find it trembling.

"Hearken, Dog," he said. "Mebby yore time will come sooner then ye reckoned. I wants thet afore sun-up ter-morrow word should go ter every Stacy in these-hyar hills, thet I've done sent out my call, an' thet they shell be ready ter answer hit—full-armed. I wants thet ye shall summons all sich

as ye hev ther power ter reach, ter meet fer counsel at my dwellin'-house ter-morrow mornin' . . . an' now I wants ter hev private speech with this-hyar man—" he jerked his head toward Henderson— "afore he gits past talkin'."

With a nod of comprehension the moonshiner and his helper slipped out of sight in the shadows, and kneeling at Jerry's side, Bear Cat again raised a cup of white whiskey to his lips.

The odor of the stuff stole seductively into his own nostrils, but he raised his eyes and saw again the evening star, not rising but setting.

"Blossom's star!" he groaned, then added, "Ye don't delight in me none, little gal! Thar hain't but one thing left thet I kin do fer ye—an' I aims ter see hit through."

With insupportable impatience he bent, waiting for a steadier light of consciousness to dawn in that other face. Every atom of his own will was focused and concentrated in the effort to compel a response of sensibility. Finally Henderson's eyes opened and the wounded man saw close to him a face so fiercely fixed that slowly, under its tense insistence, fragments of remembrance came driftingly and disjointedly back to him.

"Kin ye hear me?" demanded Bear Cat Stacy with an implacably ringing voice. "Does ye understand me?" And the other's head moved faintly—almost imperceptibly.

"Then mark me clost because I reckon both of us hes got ter stand afore many hours facin' Almighty God—an' hit don't profit us none ter mince words."

Through the haze of a brain still fogged and reeling, Henderson became aware of a hatred so bitter that it dwarfed into petulance that of the murder horde at the Quarterhouse.

"Ye come hyar . . . an' we tuck ye in." The tone rose from feebleness to an iron steadiness as it continued. "When I come inter ther Quarterhouse I 'lowed ye'd done turned traitor an' joined Kinnard Towers . . . but since they sought ter kill ye, mayhap I war misguided. . . . Thet don't make

no difference, now, nohow." He paused and struggled for breath.

"Ye tuck Blossom away from me . . . ye made her love ye because she hadn't never knowed . . . an eddicated man afore. . . . All my days an' nights I'd dreamed of her. . . . Ter make her happy, I'd gladly hev laid down my life . . . but I war jest a rough mounting man . . . an' then she seed *you*."

Henderson's lips moved in a futile effort as Bear Cat halted, gasping. His hand wavered in a weak gesture of protest—as against an unjust charge. But Bear Cat's voice leaped suddenly. "Don't stop me! Thar hain't much time left! You an' me needs ter go ter God's jedgment seat with our jobs finished. . . . I don't censure Blossom none . . . hit war es rightful thet she should want a *real* life . . . es fer ther flowers ter want sunshine. . . . But *you!* Ye stole her love—an' then abandoned her."

Henderson's eyes were eloquent with a denial—but the darkness hid it—and his lips refused utterance, while the other talked on, feebleness muting the accusing voice to a lower timbre.

"She warn't good enough fer *you*—her thet war too good fer any man! But perchance ye may be wiser dyin' then livin'." The weak utterance mounted into inexorable command.

"Now ye're a-goin' ter make good afore ye dies. . . . She trusted ye . . . an—" Turner broke suddenly into a deep sob of agony. "I don't know how fur ye taxed her trust . . . but I knows she told me she had full faith in ye, an' faith like thet don't stop ter reckon up costs. Now she's sickenin' away—an' thet trust is broke . . . an' I reckon her heart's broke, too."

Henderson moistened his lips and with a supreme effort succeeded in whispering almost inaudibly, "That's a lie."

"A lie is hit? She gave ye her lips," went on the burning indictment. "An' in these hills when a woman like Blossom

gives her lips ter a man, she gives him her soul ter keep. . . . Ye're a mountain man yoreself . . . ye knows full well what mountain folks holds. . . . Ye hain't got no excuse of ign'rance ter hide behind. Ye knows thet withouten ye weds her, folks will tell lies an' she won't never be able ter hold up her head—ner smile again."

"Stacy—" Henderson had rallied a little now, but he sagged back and at first got no further than the name. With another struggle, he added,

"I . . . I'm dying——"

"Mebby so. I hopes ye air . . . but fust ye're a-goin' over thar with me . . . an', because she'll be happier ef she thinks ye come of yore own free will. . . . I hain't a-goin' ter tell her . . . thet I dragged ye thar . . . like a sheep-killin' dog. . . . Ye're a-goin' ter let her think thet her hero has done come back ter her . . . *dee*spite death hitself."

"But—but——"

The young mountaineer broke out with something half sob and half muffled roar.

"Hell, thar hain't no but! I'm tellin' ye what ye air a-goin' ter do! With God's aid I aims ter keep ye alive thet long . . . an' atter thet—I hain't takin' no heed what comes ter pass."

"Was . . . that . . . why you . . . saved me?" The words were barely audible.

"What else would hit be? Did ye reckon hit war love for ther man thet hed done stole everything I counted dear—ther traitor thet betrayed my roof-tree? Did ye 'low thet hit war fer yore own sake I war openin' up ther war ergin, deespite ther fact that I knows hit'll make these hills run red with ther blood of my kith an' kin?"

Abruptly Bear Cat came to his feet and shouted into the darkness. Henderson saw two figures detach themselves from the inky void and come forward.

Then as they lifted him he swooned with pain.

CHAPTER XVI

DOG TATE had left his mash kettle unguarded that night, putting clan loyalty above individual interest as he hastened off to stir into action the dwellers of the Stacy cabins, and to dispatch other night-riders upon the same mission. But he sent Joe Sanders, his assistant, to convoy the wounded men along their road. They went at a labored and snail-like pace, Sanders walking on one side of the horse, supporting the swooning figure it bore, while Turner Stacy trudged at the other saddle skirt. Sometimes Bear Cat plodded on with fair erectness, setting his teeth against weariness and pain, but at other times the intermittent waves of fever rose scaldingly until, in a blind fog, he dragged shuffling feet, clinging grimly the while to pommel and stirrup-leather as his head sagged forward between his shoulders. Sometimes, too, he mumbled incomprehensible things in a voice that was weirdly unnatural. From time to time there was a halt to make sure that the life spark still flickered, though tenuously and gutteringly, in the breast of the inert thing lashed to the saddle.

When they had been on the road for three hours Bear Cat and Sanders, by a common impulse, strained their ears through what had been silence, except for the wail of the high-riding breeze among the pine crests.

Now faint, and far away, hardly more than a hint of sound, they could hear something else, and it lifted Turner out of his reek of nightmare and semi-delirium so that his eyes cleared and his head came up. It was as though a bugle had sounded a note of martial encouragement through the mists of despair.

Joe Sanders spoke shortly, half to his companion and half to himself.

"Hit kinderly seems like Dog Tate's rousin' em up. I reckon ther war's on now all right an' it's liable ter be unshirted hell."

* * * *

Blossom had been sitting until late that evening with her hands lying listlessly in her lap and her eyes staringly fixed on the blaze of her hearth. Their amber pools were darkened with jaded misery and her cheeks were pale. Their graciousness of youthful curve had been somewhat flattened, as her whole life had been flattened. Only her hair, awakened into halo-brightness by the blaze of the logs, spoke of that old vividness of color that had been a sort of delicate gorgeousness and even that nimbus had the suggestion of the glow about the head of a saint who has achieved sanctity through suffering.

"He swore he aimed ter come back ter me right soon," she repeated to herself. "I wouldn't have him imperil himself—but he mout have writ me a letter." Her instinct told her what had happened with a fulness of realization from which there was no escape. It was only because she had pretended her Cinderella dream to be a fact, that she had not all along recognized it for an impossible fairy tale. The Jerry Henderson who had promised her marriage was only a temporary Jerry: a man swept off his feet by the stress and freshet of crisis. The mountain blood in his veins had welled up to flood tide and swept away the dams of his superimposed cultivation. He had relapsed into her life—for a little while—just as his ardent tongue had relapsed into her uncouth vernacular.

Now the more permanent Jerry, awakened by his return to city conditions, was standing aloof, regarding that experience with self-contemptuous regret: thinking of it as a lapse into savagery. It had been an impetuous thing of the flesh to which his mind denied permanent sanction. The dream was over now—but she could not forget it.

Her fingers twisted themselves tightly together and she rose and leaned wearily against the mantel-shelf. As her eyes, clouded with misery, traveled about the tidy room, its every note spoke of Bear Cat Stacy. He had fashioned, for her comfort, all the furnishings that made it a place different from the rooms of other mountain cabins.

On the Pelion of her own misery she heaped the Ossa of self-condemnation. She saw again the stricken look in Turner's eyes as he had set out for Virginia after hearing the news that had cut the foundation from under all his own life-dream. She remembered, too, the gentleness with which, placing thought of her above self, he had made his renunciation.

"Oh, God," she murmured, "why air hit thet we kain't love best of all ther folks thet loves us most? Turney would hev walked through ther Valley of Death fer me—an' I've got ter break my heart fer a man thet don't hold me good enough ter wed."

Yet even now she was making excuses for the lover who had neither come nor written. The first bond between Turner and herself had been their common revolt against a life of squalid ignorance and emptiness. That revolt had carried them into the no-man's land of discontent without bringing them to the other side: the line of real attainment upon which Jerry stood secure.

Her father came once to the door, but did not enter it. His bearded face was more soberly patriarchal than ever. He had long struggled against violence in his efforts to shepherd a wild and turbulent flock. He had pleaded for the Christ-law of forgiven sins, but in his veins ran the unforgetting blood of warring generations. There had been times of late when he had felt that he would need God's help and restraint should he ever meet the man who had broken his daughter's heart.

"I reckon thar hain't sca'cely nothin' I kin say ter console her," he mused as he turned away from the door.

At length when the fire had burned low Blossom went to bed and lay wide-eyed for other hours.

Through the harping wind in the evergreens sometimes came the high, wild note of southward-winging ducks and geese—refugees from winter. Henceforth her life was all to be winter. Neither the freshly green and tuneful things of springtime nor the gorgeousness and fragrance of autumn could amend or temper its lethargy.

She had tossed until nearly dawn, and the house lay deadly quiet. If sleep came near her it was only to veer away again for each sputter of a dying ember brought her, with a start, into tenser wakefulness.

Then came another sound, and her nervous little body tightened into the dismay of panic. Unmoving, holding her breath between pressed lips, she strained her ears. There was no mistake—she had heard it again.

It was a wild note riding the wind, and now for the first time it became more than a legend in her experience. From babyhood she had heard of this night noise, long silenced by the truce, and had trembled at its portentousness. She had from childhood heard her father thank God that men were no more roused by it from their sleep: that it was one accursed thing which belonged to the past. Now it had found resurrection!

As she lay listening it sounded once more, nearer than before, a shout suggestive of a wild-cat's wail that quavered and rose and dwindled and rose again. That clan-signal of the Stacys along the ridges meant war—open and unmitigated war.

It was not merely a demonstration of inimical feeling but a definite summons. The man of that blood who heard it needed no particulars. He had his orders. Straightway he must arm and rally.

From her father's room came a deeply anguished groan and the muttering of a prayer. He, too, had been awakened and realized that the "war" had broken out afresh.

It was useless to try to sleep now. Blossom rose and threw fresh faggots on the fire. She dressed and sat with her fingers twisting and her lips trembling.

Once she stilled a scream at the rush of hoof-beats and the scatter of gravel along the road, but the commotion went by in hot haste and silence closed down again.

Eventually an abrupt shout sounded imperatively from just beyond the door—a voice which Blossom did not recognize, and as she came to her feet she heard her father's stern challenge, "Who's out thar?"

"Hit's Joe Sanders—an' I'm in haste!"

Despite the urgency of word and tone the preacher hesitated to demand:

"What business brings ye hyar in ther dead of nighttime?"

"I've got Bear Cat Stacy an' Mr. Henderson. They're both sore wounded. Fer God's sake, hasten!"

With a swiftness of motion that outstripped her father's, Blossom flung herself forward and with feverish fingers was sliding the bar from its sockets.

But while the preacher stood waiting, his lips drew themselves into an unbending line and his shaggy brows lowered. Inwardly he was praying: "Almighty God, I beseeches Ye ter strengthen me in this hour ter fergive mine enemies—fer Thou knowest thar's murder in my heart!"

As the girl threw the door wide, she saw what seemed to be three figures locked in a close embrace.

The trio lurched rather than stepped into the lighted area, and, shrinking back horrified, Blossom saw Brother Fulkerson close his house, his face marked, as she had never before seen it, with a grim unwelcome.

Sanders carried in his arms a figure whose limbs fell in grotesque inertia. Its clothing was torn by briars and bullets; matted with mire and blood. Its face was half hidden by a rough bandage made from Jerry's own handkerchief, upon

which the stains had turned from red to dull brown, except at the spots where the crimson had been renewed by an unstaunched trickle.

Bear Cat stumbled across the threshold unaided, but as he halted, blinking at the light, he reeled drunkenly and propped his disheveled body against the wall. That was for a moment only and at its end he drew himself into something nearer uprightness and swept his hand across his brow. He had not carried the matter this far to fail at the finish.

"Lay thet man on a bed," he panted with fierce earnestness. "Thar hain't no time ter waste . . . he's nigh death . . . an' he's come hyar ter be wedded."

Brother Fulkerson answered in a voice of bewilderment, tinged, too, with protest.

"Thar hain't sca'cely no life in him. Hit's too late fer marryin'."

"Not yit hit hain't . . . hit will be ef ye tarries!" Turner ripped out his words with the staccato snap of rifle fire. His own feebleness seemed to drop away like the hat he flung to one side. His eyes burned with tawny fire and a positive fury of haste. For hours, he felt he had been holding death in abeyance by a sheer grapple of resolution, and now men paused to parley and make comment. An impulse of insane wrath besieged him. He must be obeyed—and the moments were flying—the sands running out.

"Hasten now—an' talk afterwards," he burst out.

They laid Jerry on Blossom's bed, its coverings magically smoothed into comfort by her flying hands, and Joe Sanders once more pressed his pocket flask to the white lips.

The girl, buoyed up, beyond her strength, by the moment's need and the mettle of her blood, swiftly and capably eased the posture of the wounded man, loosened his heavy boots and rushed from the room to prepare fresh bandages. The stunning impact of despair would come later. Now every fighting chance must be preserved to him.

While she was still out of the room, Henderson's eyes opened in a fluttering and precarious consciousness, to find other eyes fixed on them with flaming intensity.

The basilisk gaze was fabulously reputed to bring death, but Turner Stacy was reversing its hypnotism to compel life.

"Where—am I?" whispered Jerry; and the answer was as peremptory as predestination.

"Ye're at Blossom's house—ter git married—an,' by God, ye've got ter last thet long. She's got ter believe ye come of yore own free will—see thet she does!"

The half-insensible eyes ranged vaguely about the place. The weak fingers plucked absently at the coverlet, and then essayed a gesture. The promoter seemed rallying his failing faculties for a supreme effort though his voice was hardly audible.

"But—Stacy—you don't—under—stand."

Bear Cat brought his face close; a face with belligerently out-thrust chin and fiercely narrowed eyes. Henderson must consent before Blossom returned to divine with her quick intuition that her dying lover balked in the shadow of death.

"Don't explain nothin' ter me. Save yore breath ter say 'I will.' Thet's all ye hev need ter utter now—an' hits need enough."

In his overwrought singleness of purpose Turner forgot that this man was beyond any force of threat or coercion. As he spoke so dictatorially he believed himself, too, to be facing death with equal certainty, though more slowly, and what he had sworn to do must first be done.

Yet there was such an inescapable compulsion in the ernest fixity of his pale face and burning eyes that the outstretched figure felt its own declining will merged and conquered.

"Hit's ther only decent thing thet's left fer ye ter do," went on the strained but inflexible voice. "Ye took her heart fer yore own—an' broke hit. Ye've got ter let her have yore

name an' ther consolation of believin' thet ye came ter her . . . honest, fightin' back black death hitself!"

Sometimes between sleep and waking come fugitive thoughts that seem crystal-clear, but that elude definite memory. Such a process enacted itself in the mind of the dying man. Doubt and complications were dissolved into simplicity—and acquiescence.

Faintly he nodded his head and even tried to hold out his hand to be shaken. Perhaps Bear Cat was too excited to recognize that proffer of amenity. Possibly his own bitterness was yet too black for forgiveness—at all events he turned away without response to seek out Joel Fulkerson, who had disappeared.

"Ye've got ter hasten, Brother Fulkerson," he hurriedly urged. "Jerry Henderson's done come back ter give his name ter Blossom afore he dies an' death hain't far off."

The old evangelist was bending over a medicine chest. It was a thing which a visiting surgeon had once given him and in the use of which he had developed an inborn skill that had before now saved lives and ameliorated suffering. He straightened up dubiously and faced the younger man.

"Turney," he said grimly, "ef they don't wed, folks hyarabouts'll always look askance at my little gal with a suspicion thet I'm confi*dent* is as false as hell hitself—but God made ther state of matrimony holy—an' I'm his servant—onlessen they both enters inter hit free-minded hit wouldn't be nothin' but a blasphemy. *Air* they both of one mind?"

Turner stiffened to a ramrod straightness. His hands clenched themselves into hard fists and his nostrils quivered.

"Brother Fulkerson, ye're a godly man," he declared with suppressed passion, "an' I hain't never sought ter dispute ye ner defy ye afore now—but thar hain't no time ter argyfy. Willin'ly or unwillin'ly ye're a-goin' ter wed them two—right hyar—an' now! He plighted his troth ter her. He's got a mighty brief chanct ter fulfill his pledge an' leave her

thinkin' she gave her love ter a true man. He's come acrost hyar, shot like a bob-white—jest fer thet. I've fought off death my own self ter-night—jest fer thet! Ef God has spared both of us this long, I reckon He done hit—jest fer thet! I'll answer ter Him at ther jedgment-seat, ef so be I'm wrong."

For an irresolute moment the father hesitated, then he said briefly, "Come on."

Turner wheeled, bracing himself for the bitterest ordeal of all. He must be the spokesman for a rival whom he hated beyond superlatives—and in order that Blossom might keep her dream, which was all she could now hope to salvage out of life, he meant to tell a lie which would for all time enshrine that detestable traitor. None the less, when he had drawn her aside, he spoke with great gentleness, perjuring himself with knightly self-effacement.

He took both her hands in his own and looked with a tender consideration into her forlorn eyes, gulping down the choke that rose in his throat and threatened his power of speech. Though her gaze was fixed on his face she seemed hardly to see him, so stiff and trance-like was her posture and so tight-drawn and expressionless her features. If he could soften that paralysis of grief it was worth a self-sacrificing lie.

"Blossom," he began softly, "Mr. Henderson fell inter a murder trap an' I got thar too late . . . ter fotch him out unharmed. Betwixt us we *did* come through, though, with ther breath still in our bodies . . . an' he made me pledge myself ter git him hyar in time . . . ter wed with ye afore he died."

He saw the eyes widen and soften as if the tight constriction of heart and nerve had been a little eased. Into them came even a pale hint of serenity and pride—pride for the splendid vindication of a hero whom she had tried to believe true and had been compelled to doubt. Even the bleak dreariness of widowhood could not tarnish that memory: her ideal instead of being shattered was canonized!

"I knowed he'd prove true," she loyally declared. "Despite everything I jest knowed hit deep down in my heart!"

A pallid thinning of the darkness was discernible over the eastern ridges as Brother Fulkerson, who had administered his most powerful restoratives, thrust back his medicine chest. His face became mysteriously grave as he joined the hands of his daughter and the man whose fingers were limp in their enfeebled clasp. Across the quilted four-poster stood Bear Cat Stacy, as erectly motionless as bronze. His unblinking eyes and lips, schooled into firm stoicism, might have suggested some young Indian brave going, set of purpose, to his torture. The lamp flared and sputtered toward the end of its night-long service and the fire had dwindled to an ashen desolation.

At the foot of the bed, and depressed with a dull sense of awe, was Joe Sanders, fingering his hat-brim and shifting his weight from foot to foot.

The old preacher of the hills, ordained in no recognized school of divinity, had for this occasion put aside the simple formula that the mountains knew and substituted for it such fragments as he remembered from the Church of England's more stately ritual. It was a service that he had heard infrequently and long ago, but it had stirred him with its solemn beauty and God would forgive any unmeant distortions since the intent was reverent.

"Dearly Beloved, we're gathered together hyar in ther sight of God A'mighty an' in the face of this hyar company . . . to j'ine tergither this-hyar man an' this-hyar woman." There exact memory failed him and his voice broke in a pathetic quaver. Bear Cat Stacy bit his tongue until he could taste the blood in his mouth as he held his gaze rigidly fixed above the heads of the little group. God alone knew how bitter were the broken dreams in his heart, just then.

"I require an' charge ye both, as ye will answer at ther dreadful day of jedgment—" the holy words were still

illusive and memory tricky— "thet ef either one of ye knows any—any—cause why ye kain't rightfully be j'ined tergither in matrimony . . . ye do now confess hit."

The pause which ensued lay upon the small company with oppressive weight. Joe Sanders coughed and nervously cleared his throat.

"Wilt thou have this-hyar woman fer thy wedded wife? Wilt thou love her, comfort her an' keep her in sickness an' in health?"

For a moment there was dead and unresponsive silence. A cold fear smote upon them all that death had intervened. Then Bear Cat, bringing his eyes back from their fixity, bent abruptly; so abruptly that his movement seemed a thing of violent threat.

"Don't ye hear?" he demanded in a strained whisper. "Speak whilst thar's breath left. Say 'I will.' Say hit speedily!"

Recalled by that sharp challenge out of his sinking consciousness, Jerry Henderson stirred and murmured faintly, "I will."

"Wilt thou have this-hyar man fer thy wedded husband ter serve, honor an' obey——"

But before the interrogation came to its period Blossom Fulkerson broke in with a prideful and willing avowal, "I will! I will!"

Turner Stacy felt icy moisture on his temples. His world seemed rocking as he stood straight again with wooden immobility.

"I pronounces ye man an' wife."

Bear Cat turned away, walking with the stiff fashion of an automaton. He could feel a stringent tightness like paralysis at his heart—and his limbs seemed unresponsive and heavy. Then to his ears came, on the morning breeze, that same call to arms that had stiffened Blossom into a paralysis of fear. His cramped posture relaxed, and to himself he said, "I reckon I hain't quite through yit!"

CHAPTER XVII

BLOSSOM still knelt at the bedside with eyes of absorbed suffering and fingers that strayed flutteringly toward the bandaged head.

Bear Cat, with his hand on the latch, lingered at the door, held there by a spell which he seemed powerless to combat. His part here was played out and to remain longer was an intrusion—yet he seemed unable to go. The kneeling girl was not even conscious of his presence. For her there was no world except that little one bounded by the sides and the end of the bed upon which her lover lay dying. Her hands clasped themselves at last and her face buried itself in the coverings. She was praying.

Bear Cat saw the glimmer of the firelight on her hair and to him it was all the lost gold of his dreams. He caught the sweet graciousness of her lissome curves, and his own fingers clutched at the shirt which had become stiff with dried blood. Once she had prayed for him, he remembered—but that was before her real power of loving had burned to its fulness. Now he stood there forgotten.

He did not blame her for that forgetfulness. It only demonstrated the singleness of devotion of which she was capable; the dedication of heart which he had once hoped would be lavished on himself.

He, too, was so centered on one yearning that he was beyond the realization of lesser matters, so that the gaunt preacher came within arm's length unnoticed and laid a hand on his shoulder. Brother Fulkerson nodded toward the other room, and Turner followed him with the dumb and perfunctory abstraction of a sleep-walker.

"Now, son, ef hit hain't too late ter avail, let's hev a look

at yore own hurts. Ye didn't come through totally unscathed yore own self."

Bear Cat stood apathetically and his eyes turned hungrily toward the stout partition of logs beyond which knelt the girl. It was not until the older man had spoken the second time that he replied with a flat tonelessness of voice, "My worst hurts . . . hain't none . . . thet ye kin aid."

"Thet's what I aims ter find out." Joel Fulkerson's manner was brisk and authoritative. "Strip off yore coat an' shirt."

Indifferently Bear Cat obeyed. Several times his lips moved without sound, while the other pressed investigating fingers over the splendidly sinewed torso and bathed away the dried blood.

"Hit looks p'intedly like ye've been seekin' ter prove them fruitless stories thet bullets kain't kill ye," observed the preacher at the end of his inspection, speaking with a somber humor. "Ye've done been shot right nigh yore heart, an' ther bullet jest glanced round a rib without penetratin'. Ye've done suffered wounds enough ter kill a half-dozen ord'nary humans —an' beyond wastin' a heap of blood ye don't seem much injured."

"I wisht," declared the young man bitterly, "ye'd done told me thet I was about ter lay down an' die. Thet's all I'm longin' fer now."

For some moments they were silent; then Joel Fulkerson's grave pupils flickered and a hint of quaver stole into his voice.

"Son, I've done spent my life in God's sarvice—unworthily yet plumb earnest, too, an' thar's been times a-plenty when hit almost looked ter me like He'd turned aside His face in wrath fer ther unregenerate sin of these-hyar hills. I've hed my big dreams, too, Turner . . . an' I've seed 'em fail. Oftentimes, despairin' of ther heathenism of ther growed-ups, I've sot my hopes on ther comin' generation. If ther children

could be given a new pattern of life ther whole system mout come ter betterment."

The young man had been putting on again his discarded shirt and coat, but his hands moved with the fumbling and apathetic motions of a sleep-walker. His face, turned always toward that room beyond the wall, was set in a dull immobility, yet he heard what the elder man was saying, and listened with the impatience of one whose thoughts are in travail, and whose interest for abstractions is dead. The preacher recognized this, but with a resolute effort he continued. "When *you* war a leetle shaver I seed in yore eyes thet ye hed dreams above sordidness. . . . Oft-times when I watched ye gazin' off acrost the most distant ridges I 'lowed that God hed breathed a wonderful gift inter ye . . . ther ability ter dream an' make them dreams come true. I seed thet ye hed *power,* power thet mout do great good or make yore name a terror ter mankind, dependin' on which way ye turned hit." An agonized groan came brokenly from the twisted lips. Bear Cat dropped into a chair and covered his eyes with trembling palms. He had faced his enemies without flinching, but after the cumulative forms of torture through which he had passed to-night, his stoicism threatened to break under the kind intentions of a talkative friend.

Still the evangelist went on: "I had visions of a new type of mountain folks—some day . . . when boys like you an' gals like Blossom grew up—and wedded. Folks with all the honesty an' generosity we've got now—but with ther black hate an' suspicion gone—. Ay—an' ther cause of hit gone, too, —ther blockade stills."

Turner's nails bit into his temples as if with an effort to hold the fugitive reason in his bursting head, as the words assaulted his ears.

"I've set hyar afore my fire many's ther night, a-dreamin' of some day when there'd be a grandchild on my knee . . .

yore child an' Blossom's . . . a baby thet would be trained up right."

Suddenly Turner's silence of apathy broke and he fell to trembling, while his eyes flared wildly. "In God's name why does ye have ter taunt me in this hour with reminders of all thet I've lived fer an' lost? Does ye reckon I kin ever fergit hit?" He broke off, then went on again with panting vehemence. "I hain't never had no dream but what was jest a part of *thet* dream.

"Why I've stood up thar on ther ridges in ther spring when ther face of God's earth war so beautiful thet I've wondered ef His heaven could be much better—an' thet's ther sperit of ther hills thet Blossom stood fer ter me." The shaking voice gathered volume and passion. "I've seed ther bleak misery of winter strangle all but ther breath of life hitself outen folks thet lives hyar—an' thet's what this country means ter me without Blossom! Folks knows how ter hate up hyar, but jest now, somehow, I feels thet no man in all these God-forsaken mountings kin hate life an' humanity like I hates 'em!"

Joel Fulkerson responded soberly though without reproof: "Yore man Lincoln could go right on when things was turrible black. When his own ends failed he still went on—fer others. He didn't give way ter hate. He could go on tell he give his life hitself—fer dreams of betterin' things thet needed betterment, an' he come from ther same blood as us."

"Wharfore in God's name does ye stand thar preachin' at me?" The young man's reaction from stunned torpor to passion had brought with it something like the fever of madness.

"Ye knows I holds with ye es ter schools—an' all fashion of betterment—but what's them things ter me now? What I wants in this hour is ter visit on ther man thet's ruint my life ther direst punishment thet kin be meted out—an' he's cheatin' me by a-dyin'. Listen—" He broke off and bent his

head toward the wall of Blossom's room and his voice took on a queer, almost maniacal note. "Kain't ye heer her—in thar—groanin' out her heart! Let me git outen hyar. . . . I kain't endure hit. . . . I'm liable ter do even *you* an injury ef I stays—albeit I loves ye!"

"I hates thet man in thar, too, Turner." The preacher laid a restraining hand on his companion's taut arm and sought to soothe the frenzy of wrath with the cool steadiness of his tone. "I've had need ter pray fer strength against thet hate—but I've heered ther Stacy rallyin' cry ter-night an' we've got ter hev speech."

"Speech hain't ergoin' ter mollify me. What I wants is ter hev ther things I've suffered this night paid fer. Hit's all *got* ter be paid fer!" The inheritor of feudal instincts wheeled and burst from the room, the preacher following more slowly but still determined.

Outside Turner halted. The ordeal through which he had passed had left him shaken in a frenzy of passion, and he stood looking about him with the gaze of a wild beast fretting under the feral urge of blood-lust. With a clan easily inflamed and gathering to his call, Brother Fulkerson realized the danger of that mood. Its menace must be met and stemmed before it ran to a flood-tide of homicidal violence.

The preacher came close and spoke quietly.

"I don't know yit what tuck place ter-night—over yon," he said. "I only knows I've heered acrost ther hills a sound I'd prayed I mout never hear ergin—ther cry of ther Stacys rallyin' fer battle. Ye've got power, son—power beyond ther common. What air ye goin' ter do with hit? Air ye a-goin' ter fergit yore dreams, because ther future's black afore ye? Or air ye goin' ter be big enough, since ye're denied children of yore own, ter make them dreams come true fer ther benefit of other men's children?"

Bear Cat Stacy's voice as he answered was gratingly hard and his eyes were unyielding.

"I don't know yit," he savagely announced. "I don't know yit fer sure whose a-goin' ter need punishment, but I've called on my kinsmen ter gather—an' when I knows the truth we'll be ready to deal hit out full measure."

"Ther days of feuds is past, son. Fer God's sake don't be ther backwardest man in all this evil-ridden country—you thet should be the forwardest."

But Bear Cat's hands, clenched into fists, were raised high above his head.

"My paw's in jail," he ripped out. "I hed ter go over thar ter hide out in Virginny. Ef them things hadn't come ter pass mebby I mout hev saved Blossom from her tribulation." Suddenly he fell silent. In the dim light the preacher saw his face alter to the ugly set of a gargoyle and his body come to such sudden rigidity as paralysis might have brought.

"God Almighty in heaven!" Turner exclaimed, then his words come racing in a torrent of frenzy. "I war a damn' fool not ter hev seed hit afore! Why air my paw in jail? Why did Kinnard Towers counsel me ter go ter Virginny an' hide out? Hit war because he war plannin' ter murder Jerry Henderson—an' he didn't dast do hit with us hyar! I knows now who needs killin' an' so holp me God, I hain't a goin' ter lay down ner sleep, ever again, until I kills him!" The eyes burned madly; the figure shook and he would have rushed off at the moment had not the preacher caught his arms and held them doggedly even though the infuriated young giant tossed him about in his efforts to free himself. Yet for all his thinness and age, Joel Fulkerson had power in his frame—and an unshakeable determination in his heart.

"Listen ter me," he pleaded. "I won't keep ye hyar long—an' ef ye don't listen now, ye won't never forgive yoreself hereafter. . . . Ye hain't got no cause ter misdoubt my loyalty. . . . I hain't never asked a favor of ye afore."

At any other time Turner would have acquiesced without debate and in a spirit of fairness, but now he was driven by

all the furies of his blood. He had been through the icy chill of dull despair and then plunged into the blast furnace of red wrath. Upon some guilty agency reprisal must be wreaked —and as if with a revelation, he thought he saw the origin of the conspiracy which his father had long ago suspected.

He saw it so late because until now his mind had been too focused on effects to hark back to causes, and now that he did see it, unless he could be curbed, he would run amuck with the recklessness of a Mad Mullah.

"Let me go, damn ye," the young man almost shrieked as he tore himself loose from the restraining grasp, and flung the old preacher spinning to the side so that he fell to his knees, shaken. He clambered up slowly with a thin trickle of blood on his lips, where his teeth had cut them in the fall.

"Thet war a pity, Bear Cat," he said in a queer voice, though still unangered, wiping his mouth with his bony hand. "I'd thought thet we two—with a common sorrow between us——" There he broke off, and the boy stood for a breathing space, panting and smoldering. He could not come back to cold sanity at one step because he had been too far shaken from his balance—but as he watched the gray-haired man, to whom he had always looked up with veneration and love, standing there, hurt to the quick, and realized that upon that man he had laid violent hands, the crazy fire in his arteries began to cool into an unutterable mortification.

Since the cattle trader's story had been told back in the Virginia cabin, until this moment, his mind had been successively scorched with wrath, chilled in despair and buffeted by hurricane violence, but never had it for a tranquil instant been stilled to normality. Over at the Quarterhouse, when in Berserker rage he had been lashing out through a red mist of battle, he had suffered less than since, because in action he was spending the hoarded accumulation of wrath—but since then he had been in the pits of an unbearable hell.

Now at the sight of that unresenting figure, wiping the

blood from its lip, a new emotion swept him with a flood of chagrin and self-contempt. He had struck down a friend, defenseless and old, who had sought only to give true counsel. The stubborn spirit that had upheld him as he fought his fever-scalded way over the hills, and remained with him as he watched the wedding ceremony, broke; and with face hidden behind spread palms and a body racked by a spasm of collapse, he shook with dry sobs that come in wrenching incoherence from deep in his chest.

He reeled and rocked on his feet under the tempest of tearless weeping—and like a blind man staggered back and forth, until the preacher, with a hand on each shoulder, had soothed him, as a child is soothed. At last he found the power of speech.

"Fer God's sake, Brother Fulkerson, fergive me . . . ef ye kin. . . . I don't know what I'm doin'. . . . I'm seein' red." Again his voice vaulted into choleric transports. "Ye says I mustn't call ther Stacys ter bloodshed. Ye're right. Hit's my own private job—an' I'm goin' back thar ter kill him—now! But es fer *you*, I wouldn't hev treated ye with sich disrespect fer no cause in ther world—ef I hadn't been well-nigh crazed."

"Son, I forgives ye full free . . . but ye jest suspicions these other matters. Ye hain't dead sure—and ye hain't ther man ter go out killin' without ye *air* plumb sartain. . . . Now will ye set down an' give me leave ter talk a spell?"

The boy dropped upon the edge of the porch and jerked with a palsy of wretchedness, and as he sat the old preacher pleaded.

For a while Bear Cat's attention was perfunctory. He listened because he had promised to listen, but as the evangelist swept on with an earnestness that gave a fire of eloquence to his uncouth words, his congregation of one was heeding him because of the compulsion of interest. He saw a bigger enemy and one more worthy of his warfare behind the malign

individual who was, after all, only its figure-head and coefficient.

"Ef them ye loves hed been struck ter death by a rattlesnake—and hit war feasible fer ye, 'stid of jest killin' ther snake, ter put an end ter ther pizen hitself—fer all time—would ye waste strength on a single sarpent?" The eyes of the speaker were glowing with ardor. "Men like Kinnard air snakes thet couldn't do no harm save fer ther pizen of ther copper worms. Hit's because they pertects them worms thet ther lawless stands behind sich men—an' ther law-abidin' fears 'em. Wipe out ther curse itself—an' ye wipes out ther whole system of meanness an' murder." He paused, and for the first time since his outburst Bear Cat spoke soberly.

"Over thar—at ther Quarterhouse—whar they sought ter git Henderson—they warn't nothin' but a yelpin' pack of mad dogs—all fired ter murder with white licker."

Brother Fulkerson nodded.

"I said ye hed power, an' I don't want ter see ye misuse hit.

"Ye asked me a spell back why I pestered ye with talk about betterment in this hour of yore affliction. Hit's because I wants ye ter go on fightin' fer thet dream—even ef hit's denied ye ter profit by hit. I wants thet jest now with ther Stacys gatherin' in from back of beyond, ye starts out leadin' 'em rightfully 'stid of wrongfully—fer whichever way ye leads, ye'll go far."

Bear Cat Stacy rose from his seat. His chest still heaved, but his eyes were aflame with a fire no longer baleful. In them was the thrilling blaze of far-reaching vision. For a time he stood silent, then he thrust out his hand.

"Brother Fulkerson, I've done been right close ter hell's edge ter-night—but ye've brought me out. I hevn't put by my resolve ter punish murder—if I can prove hit—but I've put by punishin' hit with more murder. I aims ter make an end of blockadin'."

"Praise God," murmured Brother Fulkerson with the glowing face of an old and wearied prophet who sees a younger and mightier rise before him. Yet because his own long labors had taken heavy toll of weariness, he knew the ashes of despair as well as the flame of ardor. Now he found himself arguing the insurmountable difficulties. "But how does ye aim ter persuade men ter forego blockadin'? Yore own kinfolks air amongst 'em."

Bear Cat's excitement of resolve brought a tremor to his voice.

"By God, I don't aim ter persuade 'em over-much. I aims ter force 'em. I aims ter rip out every still this side of Cedar Mounting—Stacys' and Towers' alike, an' I don't aim ter sneak up on 'em, but ter march open about ther business!"

It was to a campaign of persuasion, rather than abrupt coercion, that the preacher had sought to guide his convert, and at this announcement of audacious purpose he shook his head, and the hopefulness faded from his pupils.

"The system hes hits roots set deep in ancient toleration, an' hooked under ther rocks themselves. Afore ye alters hit by fo'ce, ye've got ter shake, ter the bottom-most ledges, hills thet hain't never been shuck afore."

But Bear Cat Stacy had within the hour become the crusader in spirit, hot with a new-born purpose, and it would have been as possible to send molten lava traveling uphill to go tamely back again into its bursted crater, as to shake his purpose. He was in eruption.

"I knows thet, but I aims ter blast out the bed-rock hitself an' build hit up anew.

"Hit seems ter me right now es ef I kin see ther picture of this land in y'ars ter come. I kin see men walkin' with thar heads high an' thar gaze cl'ar—'stid of reelin' in thar saddles an' scowlin' hate outen drunken eyes. I kin see sich schools es Jerry Henderson named ter me in other valleys an' coves.

"Ye says hit hain't a-goin' ter be easy, but I tells ye more then thet—hit's goin' ter be jest one mite short of impossible—an' none-the-less I'm a-goin' ter do hit. I'm a-goin' ter lay ther foundations fer a peace thet kin endure. I reckon folks'll laugh at 'em fust, an' then mark me down fer death, but I means ter prevail afore I quits—an' I'm beholden ter ye fer p'intin' me ther way."

The preacher clasped his hands in a nervous uncertainty. The transition from night to the twilight of the day's beginning had passed through its most ghostly vagueness to a fog-wrapped morning. A dour veil of gray and sodden mists trailed along the slopes with that chill that strikes at the heart and quenches the spirit in depression.

Joel Fulkerson stood, gray, too, and colorless.

"I don't hardly know how ter counsel ye, son," he said, and his voice was that of a man whose burden of weariness was crushing him.

"Ye aims ter do a thing thet hain't nuver been successfully undertook afore. Ef ye seeks ter fo'ce men 'stid of persuadin' 'em—ye're mighty liable ter fail—and cause ther valleys ter run red."

Bear Cat's lips twisted themselves into a smile ironically mirthless.

"Brother Fulkerson," he said, "in thar—ye kin almost hear her moanin' now—is ther gal thet I've always loved. Ter me ther ground she walks on is holy—ther air she breathes is ther only air I kin breathe without tormint . . . ter-night I fotched hyar ther man thet my heart was clamorin' ter kill: fotched him hyar ter wed with her." As he paused Turner's face twitched painfully.

"Ye says I mustn't undertake this job in no spirit of vengeance. Thar hain't no other fashion I *kin* undertake hit. I must needs throw myself inter this warfare with all ther hate—an' all ther love thet's in my blood. I hain't a-goin'

ter try ter gentle iniquity—I'm goin' ter strive ter tromp hit underfoot."

When Bear Cat was joined by Joe Sanders a few minutes later, the ridges were still grim and unrelieved heaps of ragged gray. The sky was lowering and vague, and the face of the sun pale and sullen.

Joe, too, in that depressing dimness looked like a churlish ghost, and as the pair stood silently in the road they saw a trio of horsemen approaching and recognized at their head Dog Tate, mud-splashed and astride a horse that limped stiffly with weariness.

Dog slid from his saddle, and reported briefly.

"Ther boys air a-comin' in from ther branch waters an' ther furthermost coves. I've done started a tide of men flowin' ter-night."

"I'm beholden ter ye. I reckon we'd all better fare over ter my house and make ready ter meet 'em thar."

Tate leaned forward and gripped Bear Cat's arm.

"I've done warned everybody thet our folks must come in quiet. I 'lowed ye'd want ter hold counsel afore any man fired a shot—but—" He paused and looked furtively about him, then lowered his voice. "But thar's a thing comin' ter pass thet don't pleasure me none. Kinnard Towers air a-ridin' over hyar ter hev speech with ye—an' ef ye jest says ther word—thar hain't no need of his ever gittin' hyar."

"Kinnard Towers!" For an instant an astonished and renewed anger flared in Bear Cat's pupils, and the face of the other man blackened with the malevolence of a grudge long nursed and long festering in repression.

"Kinnard Towers," repeated Dog Tate, vindictively mouthing the name. "He's hired more men killed then he's got teeth in his jaws. He's raked hell itself, stirrin' tribulation fer yore people an' mine—an' I've done took my oath. Jest es soon es things start poppin' he's my man ter kill!"

Abruptly Tate fell to trembling. His face became a thing

of ash and flint. From his pocket he drew a small package folded in newspaper, which he unwrapped and held out, displaying an old and very soiled handkerchief, spotted with dark discolorations. A shrill note sharpened his voice as he spoke in vehement haste.

"Thar hit air! Thet's my daddy's 'kerchief—an' thet spot air ther blood thet was spilled outen his heart—by a bullet Kinnard Towers caused ter be fired! Seems like I kin see him a-lyin' thar now, sort of gaspin' an' tryin' ter say somethin' ter me, thet he didn't never succeed in utterin' afore he died! I wasn't hardly more'n a baby them days an' when I come ter manhood they'd done made a truce an' yore paw 'lowed thet hit bound me. But now!" The man's excited tones cracked like a mule-whip. "Now ef ther truce air ended, hit's my right ter hev ther fust chance."

Slowly, with a comprehending sympathy but a firm resolution, Stacy shook his head.

"Ye've got ter be as heedful an' patient es ye bade ther others be. I've got a right-sensible hankerin' atter vengeance myself to-day, Dog—but I've got ter hold my hand for a spell yit, an' ye've got ter give me yore solemn pledge ter hold your'n, too. Hit mustn't be said thet ef any man—even Kinnard—trusts us enough ter ride inter our midst when we're gathered, he kain't be heered in safety."

The messenger stood looking down at the grewsome souvenir of the tragedy which he believed left him a debtor with an unpaid score. Clan obedience and individual lust for reprisal shook him in profound dilemma, but finally, with a strong effort, he nodded his head—though grudgingly.

"I gives ye my hand," he said in a dull voice, and up to them at that moment rode a spattered horseman who, because of Towers' relationship and marriage with a Stacy wife, was qualified as a neutral.

"I brings tidin's from Kinnard Towers," he announced.

"He seeks ter hold a parley with ye. He comes in peace, an' he wants yore pledge thet he kin fare hither without harm."

Turner's jaw came out with a belligerent set, but he answered slowly. "I was over at his place last night an' he didn't hardly hold *me* harmless. None-the-less, tell him ter come on. I'll send back a few of my kinfolks with ye ter safeguard him along ther way."

CHAPTER XVIII

LUKE TOWERS, the father of Kinnard, had been one of those fierce and humorless old feudists of primal animosities and exploits as engagingly bold as the feats of moss-trooping barons. The "Stacy-Towers" war had broken into eruption in his day. No man remembered to just what origin it was traceable—but it had, from its forgotten cause, flared, guttered, smoldered and flared again until its toll of lives had reached a scattering summary enumerated in scores and its record had included some sanguinary highlights of pitched battle. The state government had sought to regulate its bloodier phases with the impressive lesson of troops and Gatling guns, but that had been very much like scourging tempestuous seas with rods.

Courts sat and charged panels, with a fine ironic mask of solemnity. Grand juries were sworn and listened with an equal mockery of owlish dignity. Deputies rode forth and returned with unserved subpoenas. Prosecutions collapsed, since no law unbacked by public sanction in its own jurisdiction can prevail. Stacys and Towers, alike fierce in private quarrel and jealous of their right of personal settlement, became blankly ignorant in the witness chair; welded by their very animosities into a common cause against judge and jury.

There had been, among that generation of Stacys, no such outstanding figure as old Mark Towers, the indomitable lion of the hills. Kinnard had followed Mark, bringing to the succession no such picturesque savagery—but still a bold spirit, tempered by craft. In lieu of the sledge blow he favored the smiling face with the dirk unsheathed behind his back. Times were altering and to him mere leadership meant less than enough. He was also covetous of wealth, in a land of meagerness. To clan loyalty as an abstract

principle he must have added such obedience as comes only from fear—and men must know that to thwart him was dangerous. Upon that principle, he had built his dominance until men shaped even their court testimony to the pattern of his requirements. At first the Stacy clan had challenged his autocracy, but twenty years before, the truce had been made and, since no Stacy leader had arisen of sufficient caliber to wrest from him the ascendency of his guile and bold wits, he had triumphed and fattened in material wealth.

The farm that he had "heired" from his father, with its few fallow acres of river bottom, had spread gradually but graciously into something like a domain.

He might now have moved his household to a smoother land and basked in the security of fair affluence—but an invisible bond chains the mountain-born to mountain environment. Highland nostrils shut themselves against lowland air. Highland lips spit out as flat and stale that water which does not gush from the source of living brooks.

There were enemies here who hungered for his life—a contingency which he faced with open-eyed realization—enemies actuated by grievances apart from feud cleavage. Three attempts upon his life, he had already survived. Some day he would not escape. But that eventuality was more welcome, despite its endless threat, than an ease that carried with it surrender of his rude ascendency and the strong intoxication of petty might.

For several years now he had been hearing tales of a Stacy youth who bore the ear-marks of leadership, and from whom, some day, he might expect a challenge of power. If such a test came, he must combat a younger and fierier adversary when his own prime had passed.

Elsewhere in the hills waves of transition were encroaching on the old order of lethargic ignorance. The hermit blindfold was being loosened from eager eyes—and men like himself were being recognized and overthrown. So far the rock-

built ridges of Cedar Mountain had been a reef, protecting his own locality—but the advent of Jerry Henderson had bespoken the imminence of a mounting tide—and whispered the warning of deluge.

The elimination of Jerry had seemed imperative, but the result promised disaster—since the wounding of Bear Cat had threatened the wrath-glutting of the Stacys.

There was only one method of discounting that danger. Bear Cat had come single-handed to his stronghold—he must now go single-handed, or escorted only by his customary body-guard, into the heart of Stacy territory, disavowing responsibility for the attack. He must, by that convincingly reckless device, appear to demonstrate that he trusted himself among them and expected in turn to be trusted by them.

He hoped with a fair degree of confidence that Jerry Henderson had not reached the minister's alive—or that at all events he had not been able to talk with a revealing fluency.

So the guileful old wolf had set out to ride boldly through an aroused and hostile country, facing a score of parlous contingencies.

As he rode, he heard the rallying cry and its full portent in no wise escaped his just appraisal. It caused him to spur on faster, however, for the ugliness of the situation made it the more imperative that he should reach Lone Stacy's house in time to present himself as an ally before he was sought out as an enemy.

But when he had sent his message ahead by a neutral bearer, Kinnard Towers slowed down and watched the stream of horsemen that flowed past him: all men with scowling eyes responding to the cry which meant war: all men who passed without attack, only because, as yet, the summons had not been explained.

"By ther godlings!" muttered the Towers chieftain, with a bitter humor, "I didn't know thar was sich a passel o' Stacys in ther world. They'll stand a heap of thinnin' out!"

"An' as shore es hell's hot," growled Black Tom Carmichael with a dark pessimism brooding in his eyes, "they'll *do* right-smart thinnin' out their own selves—once they gits stirred up."

* * * *

By the time the sun had fully dissipated the early mists, the door yard of Lone Stacy's house was dotted with little groups of men, and from the wide doors of the barn more faces looked expectantly out. Along the sandy creek-bed of the road, where a flock of geese waddled and hissed, other arrivals stamped their feet against the cold of the frost-stiffened mud, and rammed chapped hands into trouser pockets.

They talked little, but waited with an enduring patience. They were determined men, raggedly clothed and bearded; incurious of gaze and uncommunicative of speech—but armed and purposeful. They were men who had left their beds to respond to the call of their clan.

Slowly Bear Cat circulated among the motley crowd, exchanging greetings, but holding his counsel until the tide of arrivals should end. It was a tatterdemalion array that he had conjured into conclave with his skittering whoop along the hill-tops. There were lads in jeans and veterans in long-tailed coats, green of seam and fringed of cuff. They carried rifles of all descriptions from modern repeaters to antiquated squirrel guns, but, in the bond of unshrinking stalwartness, they were uniform.

To hold such a headstrong army—mightily leaning toward violence—in leash needed a firm hand, and an unbending will. Old fires were kindling in them, ignited by the cry that had been a match set to tinder and gunpowder.

It was, all in all, a parlous time, but no one caught any riffle of doubt in Turner Stacy's self-confident authority as he passed from group to group, explaining the vital need of forbearant control until Kinnard Towers had come, spoken and departed. The Stacy honor was at stake and must be

upheld. His morning hurricane of passion had left him alertly cool and self-possessed—but there was battle-light in his eyes.

In grim expectancy they waited, while nerves tightened under the heavy burden of suspense. Turner had sternly commanded cold sobriety, and the elders had sought to enforce it, but here and there in hidden places the more light-headed passed flasks from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth.

Such was the crowd into which Kinnard Towers eventually rode, with his double body-guard, and even his tough-fibred spirit must have acknowledged an inward qualm of trepidation, though he nodded with a suave ease of bearing as he swung himself from his saddle at the gate.

The urbane blue eyes under the straw-yellow brows were not unseeing, nor were they lacking in a just power of estimate. They noted the thunder-cloud quiet—and did not like it, but, after all, they had not expected to like it.

As Bear Cat came forward the Towers chieftain began unctuously. "How air Mr. Henderson? Air he still alive?"

"He war last time I heered," was the curt reply.

Towers nodded with the air of one whose grave anxiety has been allayed, but under the meditative quality of his Sabbath calm he was wishing that he could learn, without asking, whether Jerry had been able to talk. A great deal depended on that—but making the best of affairs as he found them, he broached his mission.

"This hyar trouble came up in my place—an' hit's made me mighty sore-hearted," he avowed. "But I've got ther names of every man thet war thar when I come in—an' I rid over hyar ter proffer ye my aid in runnin' down ther matter and punishin' them thet's guilty." He paused, and feeling the unmasked distrust with which his assurance was greeted, added:

"I reckon yore father's son wouldn't hardly want no *illegal* punishment."

Bear Cat declined to meet diplomacy in kind.

"Ye reckons thet my father's son aims ter stand out fer a truce thet's kept on one side an' broke on ther t'other. Air thet what ye means?"

Kinnard Towers felt his cheek-bones grow red and hot with anger at the taunt, but he blunted the edge of acerbity and parried in sober dignity.

"Ef I'd aimed ter bust ther truce I wouldn't hardly hev interfered ter save ye, fust in Marlin Town and then ergin last night. I rid over hyar with ther roads full of Stacys ter hold counsel with ye. I aimed ter tell ye all I knowed and find out what *you* knowed, so thet betwixt us we could sift this matter ter ther bottom."

"Whatever ye've got ter say ter me, ye kin say ter these men, too," was the tartly unconciliating reply. "I've pledged ye safety twell ye rides back home. I aims ter say some things myself—an' I reckon most of 'em won't pleasure ye none." The speaker's eyes flared as he added, "But from this day forwards either you or me air goin' ter run things in these hills an' ther t'other one of us won't hardly hev standin' room left."

"I reckon," said Kinnard Towers,—and now the ingratiating quality that had sugar-coated his address dissolved into frank enmity,—"I reckon ef thet's ther road ye elects ter travel, thar hain't scarcely any avail in my tarryin' hyar. I mout es well say farewell an' tell hell with ye! Yore paw wouldn't hardly be so malicious an' stiff-necked. Ye don't need ter be told thet I've got numerous enemies hyar in these mountings, too—an' thet more'n once they've marked me down fer death."

The younger man's attitude was that of unmasked distrust, yet of patience to listen to the end. Kinnard Towers, hirer of assassins though he was, spoke with a certain dignity that savored of sound logic. "Moreover, ye knows right well thet when I rid over hyar with yore war-whoop skit-

terin' from hill-top ter hill-top, an' yore men trapesin' along highways an' through ther timber trails, I traveled, in a manner of speakin', with my neck in a halter. I was willin' ter risk ther shot from the la'rel because, in a fashion, you an' me holds ther lives an' ther welfare of our people in ther hollers of our hands. I fared hither seekin' peace; aimin' ter stand side by side with ye in huntin' down ther men thet sought ter murder you an' yore friend from down below."

A crimson flush mantled on the full jowl and bull-like neck. The voice shook with antagonism. "But I didn't come over hyar ter *sue* fer peace—an' the day hain't dawned yit when any man kin order me ter leave ther mountings whar I belongs."

"By God in heaven!" Bear Cat Stacy leaned forward and his words cracked like flame in green wood. "Ye says ye stands fer law—an' ye' makes slaves of ther men thet runs ther co'tes of law! Ye says ye stands fer ther people an' ye fosters thar ign'rance and denies 'em roads an' schools. Ye sacrifices everything fer yore own gain—an' ther profit of yore boot-lickers thet seeks ter run blockade stills. Wa'al ef thet's law, I'm goin' ter start ter-day makin' war on ther law. I'm goin' ter see what an outlaw kin do! I aims ter give thet message to them thet's gathered hyar this afternoon—an' as soon as I'm done talkin' I'm goin' ter commence actin'. Atter ter-day thar'll be decent Towerses alongside of me and worthless Stacys 'longside of *you!*" His voice fell—then leaped again to passion. "I reckon ther time's ripe. Let's go now an' talk with 'em. I've jest been a-waitin' fer ye ter get hyar."

Deeply perplexed and depressed with the foreboding of one who fights enemies shadowy and ill-defined, yet forced, since he had come so far, to go forward, Kinnard Towers followed, as Bear Cat led the way to a huge rock which afforded a natural rostrum.

"Men," cried Turner Stacy when a semi-circle of lowering

faces had pressed close and attentive about the shallow eminence, "last night Mr. Henderson an' me come sore wounded from ther Quarterhouse, whar a murder hed done been hatched: a murder thet partly failed. I sent out messengers ter call ye tergether fer counsel as ter whether ther truce hed been busted. I hain't found out yit fer sartain whether hit has er not—an' until we knows fer sure we're still held in our bonds of peace. Meanwhile I've done give my hand ter Kinnard Towers hyar, in my name an' yourn, thet he kin ride home, safe. If he speaks ther truth he's entitled ter respect. If he lies thar'll be time a plenty an' men a plenty ter deal with him hereafter. Kinnard aims ter talk ter ye, an' I wants thet ye hearken till he gits through."

The hereditary foeman, who knew that he was being pilloried in bitter disbelief, stood with an erect calmness as he was introduced. His face held an almost ministerial tranquillity, though his sense apprised him of the hush that goes ahead of the storm. He saw the green patches of the pines against the unaltered blue of the sky and the dull sparkle awakened by the sunlight on the barrels and locks of fiercely-caressed firearms.

As he moved a pace forward a chorused growl of truculent hatred was his reception, but that was a demonstration for which he was prepared—and against which he had steeled himself. He was less accustomed to making public pleas than to giving orders in cloistered privacy—but he was a lord of lies, and deeply versed in the prejudices upon which he hoped to play.

"I come over hyar this day," he declared by way of preface, "of my own free will—an' unsolicited by any man. I come open-eyed an' chancin' death, because I knowed I'd done kept ther compact of ther peace—an' I trusted myself ter ther upstandin' honesty of ther Stacys ter do likewise. Ef harm overtakes me hit'll be because I trusted thet honesty over-much."

CHAPTER XIX

AS the snarling restiveness moderated to curiosity under Kinnard's uncouth forcefulness and seemingly candid words, he repeated the mendacious story of his outraged righteousness, when he had learned that in his tavern the murder of a gentleman from the lowlands had been attempted. His place, he pointed out, was open to all comers —the law required that he extend its entertainment to every man who paid the price. He himself had not been present in time to prevent the outbreak. Had he entertained a prior and guilty knowledge of the plot, he would scarcely have interfered last night. He would not have come to-day with his assurance of sympathy and his proffer of aid into a nest of swarming hornets.

Mr. Henderson's life had been attempted by some unknown foe once before, he reminded them. Apparently it had been his misfortune to make enemies as well as friends. The speaker paused and shook his head regretfully.

"He come hyar a stranger amongst us an' war tuck in by Lone Stacy, a man we all trusts—a man we all loves. Why should ther hand of anybody hev been lifted erginst him? Ther stranger thet sojourns hyarabouts, mindin' his own business, gin'rally walks safe. Hit's a question I kain't answer. . . . Mebby hit war because Mr. Henderson fell inter ther error of preachin' too strong a doctrine of change. . . . I only knows this much myself: thet on ther night he got hyar I heered him talk thet a-way—an' outen sheer friendliness I warned him thet amongst us simple folks thar'd be some thet wouldn't take kindly ter sich notions. He aimed ter show us how wrong our idees war; notions of life thet

our grand-sires hes fostered fer two hundred y'ars an' upwards. He aimed ter undo in a twinklin' all thet's growed into our bones an' blood an' free life endurin' ginerations—an' ter *civilize* us. It war considerable undertakin'."

Again a low growl ran through his audience, but this time its indignation was not aimed at the speaker.

"I've even heered men claim thet Mr. Henderson come up hyar seekin' ter rob us in ther interest of ther railroad, though I don't sceercely like ter believe hit—ner even ter repeat hit."

Once more the blond head was shaken in sad regretfulness.

"We've done dwelt hyar, cut off from ther rest of ther world fer ginerations. We hain't got much eddication, but we're honest an' independent an' all we asks is ter be left alone ter work out our own salvation. In other times ther feud split us up into enemies, but since ther truce war made we've consorted peaceable." For a space he paused to gaze meditatively at the spear-like timber fringe against the fleckless blue.

"Ef Mr. Henderson unthoughtedly meddled an' somebody acted rash," went on Towers easily, "sorry es we all feels fer hit, an' det'armined es we all air ter punish thet person in full accordance with ther law—still hit warn't no Stacy thet was attacked. Mr. Henderson lays thar a-dyin' an' fer him I hain't got no feelin' but charity—but he warn't no Stacy! Ther folks down below, whar he hails from, will take plentiful pains ter avenge his death. Ter them, we hain't nothin' but benighted barbarians of ther bloody hills—an' he war an eddicated gentleman! Hit'll be a turrible pity ef we neighborly men goes ter war ergin over any false suspicion."

Kinnard swept his hands outward in a gesture like a benediction and stepped back. Where slurring growls had greeted him he left a silence which testified to the telling effect of his words. Their anger now was readier to burn into in-

dignation against the invader who had sought to alter their life.

Though the young Stacy had interrupted by no word or sound, there was something in his stillness of deportment that presaged storm ready to burst. As he came to the edge of the bowlder his movements had the smooth elasticity of a panther —and when he stood silent for a moment his eyes rained lightning bolts of intensity.

"I've done stood here without interruptin' an' listened at Kinnard Towers' talk," he said, and the contempt of his tone was as stinging as a rawhide lash. "'Most all of what he has told ye, I believes ter be lies an' if they be, I aims ter have a full reckonin', but afore I begins I wants ter charge ye all in full solemnity thet we've pledged him a safe journey home —an' ef harm comes ter him afore he gits thar our name stands disgraced ter ther end of time. He's a hirer of murderers an' he's fattened offen poverty an' ther gallows air too good fer him—but a pledge is a bond!"

Bear Cat wheeled for a moment to face Kinnard Towers himself as he made this assertion, then he proceeded with the crescendo of a gathering tempest.

"He says thet ther murder of Jerry Henderson hain't no consarn of your'n, and he tells ye thet Henderson's under suspicion of seekin' ter cheat ye outen yore birthright. Ef he believed thet on good reason an' held his counsel thus far he aided an' abetted ther robbery. But I believes thet's a lie, too, because ef Jerry Henderson sought ter rob ye an' plunder ye successfully all he needed ter do war to *make a deal* with Kinnard Towers, fust.

"This man thet rules ther country from a boozin' ken, whar' ther stench of infamy pizens ther air, tells ye he stands fer law—an' I tells ye thet his kind of law makes all decent men want ter be outlaws. Judges an' juries hyarabouts does his biddin' ter ther damage of every honest man, because they walks in terror of him—an' debauches themselves ter hold

his favor! He flies high an' his wings are strong—he passes fer an eagle—but he feeds on carrion."

Bear Cat swept into a stinging arraignment of the chicanery with which he charged Towers, piling invective upon anathema with the passionate sweep of a tornado. As faces that had listened to Towers with attention hardened again, Kinnard braced himself and forced a satirical smile.

"This man aimed ter git Jerry Henderson from ther fust day he come hyar—not because ther stranger sought ter feel ther way fer ther railroad, but because he dared ter talk fer enlightenment: for schools whar yore children could grow inter straight manhood, an' roads thet could take yore crops and timber ter market. Sich open speech didn't suit Kinnard, hyar, because when folks has knowledge they ceases ter be victims ter his greed and cunnin'.

"Jerry Henderson spoke out his belief an' he was marked down by Kinnard Towers fer death. He's a-dyin' now."

A low and dangerous murmur ran over the crowd, but Bear Cat Stacy stilled it with his raised hands.

"I believes thet Kinnard connived with ther Judas revenuer to jail my paw expressly ter cl'ar ther road fer this murder. Ef thet's true he didn't jest attack a furriner, but he affronted every Stacy an' busted ther truce ter boot! Till I kin prove what I suspicions, I aims ter hold my hand; but I stud in Brother Fulkerson's house last night amids ther ashes of sorrow an' I've done dedicated what's left of my life ter one aim.

"I don't know whether I'll hev holp or go single-handed, but as Almighty God hears me, I aims ter clean up these hills! I aims thet 'stid of grumblin' like old grannies because our fields air littered with rock an' our roads air all dirt, we shell take ther rock outen ther fields an' put hit on ther roads. I aims thet every child thet hankers fer enough larnin' ter raise himself above ther level of beasts shell hev a school whar he kin git hit. I aims thet when yore baby falls sick

or thar's a bornin' at yore house, ther doctor kin git thar—in time!"

He paused, and his audience, swept by the abandon of his extemporaneous fervor, fell into an excited approval. The magic of inherent strength and sheer personality was at work upon them.

"Before sich things es them kin be brought ter pass," began the speaker again in a voice dropping suddenly to stern calm, "ther wrath of numerous folks will flare up ter murder-hate—because thar's a stumblin' block in ther path thet's ancient an' thet hes got ter be man-powered loose. Betwixt us an' betterment stands ther thing thet all our troubles springs from—an' though hit don't profit but one man in every score, yit thar be some amongst ye thet'll die fer hit!"

He stopped and looked down into faces puzzled and uncomprehending. Eyes turned up to the speaker out of lean and serious visages, waiting for his next sentence, and he himself stood there for a moment or two in a silence which was as much an emphasis as a blank margin which stresses the conspicuousness of print.

His own face, still drawn with the travail of last night's gamut of emotion, and his figure motionless with the pent-up dynamics of a tight-wound coil, carried the impression of action presently to burst with a force beyond governing. They had always thought of him as a man bred for action but short of speech; a man bound like themselves by the constrictions which generations of taciturn ancestors had laid upon fluency, damming it into difficulty. But now self-consciousness was as absent from his attitude as though the torrential quality of his thoughts and words came from an external force sweeping through him and speaking through him.

Abruptly he thrust a hand into the breast pocket of his coat—a coat torn recently by bullets meant for his heart—and drew out a thing familiar to every man in that assem-

blage: a flat flask of colorless glass, filled with a fluid as white as itself. He held the thing high above his head, and ripped out his words with a crackling force.

"Thar's ther enemy thet's laid hits curse on the men an' women of these-hyar mountings! Thar's ther thing thet's hatched from ther worm of their still—ther pizen thet breeds in ther la'rel! *That's* what turns kindly men inter brutes an' wives inter widders an' children inter orphans! Thar's ther thing thet hes made ther purest blood in all America bear ther repute afore ther rest of ther world of a people of bloody outlaws!

"Hit's bottles like thet thet hes shut ther doors of our country against progress an' prosperity—an' barred out ther future from ther hills. Hit's bottles like thet thet hes chained us ter ther dead past when our kinsmen down below war a-marchin' on ter advancement. Hit's ther false idee thet a man hes a license ter break ther law in blockadin', even ter ther hurt of them thet don't blockade, thet's carried along with hit a contempt fer all other law—an' raised up a spirit of murder an' lay-wayin'."

As he paused again for a breathing space, still holding high the flask above his head, he might have read a warning in the clouding of pupils and the tightening of lips; in the out-thrusting of jaws and the stiffening of shoulders. But these indications of hostile sentiment seemed only to bring a more fiery hotness to his words and his voice.

"I made this licker myself," he declared. "I made hit up thar in ther thickets. My paw lies in jail now fer doin' ther same thing. Many's ther night—an' ther day, too—thet I've laid up thar drunk with ther pizen thet I've brewed—but no man will ever see me drunk ergin!

"I've carried this flask in my pocket whar I could feel hit a-layin' against my heart—ever since ther day I quit. I've carried hit thar so thet thar wouldn't never be a time, day or night, when hit couldn't hev ther chance ter lick me, ef so

be hit proved bigger an' stronger then me. I wasn't askin' no favors of ther worm of ther still—an' now I hain't a-goin' ter give hit none! Thar's been times when my throat scalded me an' my belly tormented me—when I felt like as ef I'd burn an' shrivel ef I didn't uncork hit an' drink. But I hain't never teched hit since then—an' now I kin laugh at hit. Now I know that Satan helped me ter make hit—an' I'm a-goin' ter make war on hit till I stomps hit out or hit kills me!"

Bear Cat Stacy, with that quick gesture so often seen in the hills, raised the flask to his mouth and jerked out the cork with his teeth—then he spat the stopper out of his mouth, and with hand again raised high, inverted the flask so that the contents gurgled out in a thin stream and, in the dead silence, the blubbering sound of the emptying was as if the thing itself was giving up its life with a sob of protest.

Then dashing down the bottle and shattering it on the rocks, the young man broke out with a crescendo of vehemence.

"What you men hev seed me do with thet-thar flask of blockade licker thet I made myself, ye're a-goin' ter see me do in like fashion with all the rest this side of Cedar Mounting. Ye're a-goin' ter see me lift ther curse thet's been on us like a lunacy an' a pestilence. Ye're goin' ter see me smash every flask an' every bottle. Ye're goin' ter see me empty out every jug an' knock in ther head of every kag an' barrel, twell ther spleen of meanness an' murder runs out with ther licker—an' a peace comes thet kin hope ter endure."

Then with abrupt and climacteric effect he wheeled and shouted to someone who stood unseen behind the angular shoulder of the rock itself. The next moment he lifted up and set down at his feet a spiral thing of copper tubing which caught on its burnished coils the brightness of the sun and gave back a red glitter.

"Ther day of hills enslaved by a copper sarpint hes done come to an end!" he declared in a passion-shaken voice. "I

aims ter do ter every cursed one of 'em this side of Cedar Mountain what I'm goin' ter do ter this one, hyar an' now!"

He seized up an axe which had been lying at his feet and swung it above his head. Poised in that posture of arrested action, his final words were defiantly thundered out.

"I've done took my oath ter hang these things like dead snakes along ther highway fer all men ter see. They stands accountable fer poverty an' squalor an' bloodshed. Because of ther pestilence they've brought an' ther prosperity they've turned away—they've got ter go."

The ax crashed down in stroke after stroke upon the coiled thing at his feet, gashing it into destruction as the crowd broke into a restive shuffling of feet and looked on in dismay—as yet too dumfounded for open protest.

"My God, Bear Cat's done gone crazed," whispered a man on the outskirts of the crowd. "He's plumb fittified."

Slowly the spell of astonishment began to give way to a fuller realization of the heresy that had been preached and which had appalled them by its audacity. Comparatively few of them were actual moonshiners but at other times many of them had been—and their spirit was defense of their institutions. Yet the face of this young man, bred to their own traditions, was fired with an ardor amazingly convincing and dauntless. In many of the elder heads had glimmered a germ of the same thought that Bear Cat had put into hot words; glimmered in transient consideration, to be thrust back because the daring needed for its expression was lacking. Here was Bear Cat Stacy boldly proclaiming his revolutionary purpose in advance because he wished to be fair; announcing that if need arose he would wage war on his enemies and his friends alike in its fulfilment. It would take a bold spirit to volunteer aid—and yet there were those whose only objection to the crusade was its mad impracticability. There were others, too, who, as Bear Cat had prophesied, would fight such vandal menace to the death.

So, after the first spell-bound pause, a threatening growl ran through the crowd and then like a magpie chorus broke and swelled the babel of discussion. Out of it came a dominating note of disappointment—almost disgust—for the leader to whom they had loyally rallied. Kinnard Towers stood for a while appraising their temper, then his lips parted in a smile that savored of satisfaction.

"So Bear Cat Stacy goes dry!" he exclaimed with a contemptuous tone intended to be generally overheard. Then in a lower voice he added for Turner's ear alone:

"Son, ye've done made a damn' fool of yoreself, but hit hain't hardly fer me ter censure ye. Hit suits me right well. Afore this day I feared ye mout be troublesome ter me, but ye've done broke yore own wings. From this time forward ye hain't nothin' but an eaglet thet kain't rise offen ther ground. I was sensibly indignant whilst ye blackguarded me a while ago—but now I kin look over hit. I reckon yore own people will handle ye all right, without any interference from me."

The chief of the Towers clan turned insolently on his heel and walked away and the crowd fell back to let him pass.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN the Jews heard of a Messiah coming as a king they made ready to acclaim him, but when they found him a moralist commanding the sacrifice of their favorite sins, they surrendered him to Pilate and cried out to have Barrabas freed to them.

That afternoon Turner Stacy, the apostate leader, saw his kinsmen breaking into troubled groups of seething debate. The yeast of surprise and palpable disappointment was fermenting in their thoughts. They had come prepared to follow blindly the command of a warrior—and had encountered what seemed to them a noisy parson.

Those who saw in the young man a bigger and broader leadership than they had expected were those who just now said little. So some regarded him with silent and pitying reproach while others scowled openly and spat in disgust—but all dropped away and the crowd melted from formidable numbers to lingering and unenthusiastic squads. They had not even attached serious importance to his threat upon blockading—it was mere bumptiousness indicating his mercurial folly.

In every indication he read utter repudiation by his clan. His eager but limited reading had taught him that every true leader, if he is far enough in advance of those he leads, must bear this bitter brunt of misunderstanding, but he was young and a freshly inspired fanatic, and that meant that he was in this respect, humorless—but he was not beaten.

Standing somewhat apart with a satirical smile drawing his lips, Bear Cat watched them ride away, and when most of them had gone his uncle, Joe Stacy, came over and stood by his side,

"Ontil ter-day, Turner," he said with a note of deep sorrow in his voice, "I 'lowed ye hed ahead of ye a right hopeful future. I 'lowed ye'd be a leader—but ye kain't lead men contrarywise ter doctrines thet they fed on at thar mothers' breasts. I've always kind of hed ther notion thet someday ye'd go down thar ter Frankfort an' set in ther legislature . . . but ter-day ye've done flung away ther loyalty of men that bragged about ye an' war ready ter die, follerin' ye."

"I reckon they kin find plenty of men ter lead 'em *thet* way,—round an' round in circles thet don't git nowhars," came the defiant response. "Thet hain't ther sort of leadership I craves."

"Hit hain't thet I holds no love fer blockade 'stillin'," explained the older man seriously. "I got my belly full a long time back—an' quit. Ef ye could stomp hit out, I'd say do hit—but ye kain't. Ye hain't jest seekin' ter t'ar out stills—ye're splittin' up yore own blood inter factions an' warfare. Thar hain't nothin' kin come outen hit all, save fer ye ter be diskivered some day a-layin' stretched out in a creek-bed road, with a bullet bored through yore body."

Bear Cat only shook his head with stubborn insistence. "Ye don't raise no crop," he declared, "twell ye've done cl'ared ther ground, an' ef ther snags goes deep hit takes dynamite."

"Then I kain't dissuade ye? Ye aims ter go ahead with hit?"

"I aims ter go ahead with hit twell I finishes my job or gets kilt tryin'."

"Then thar hain't nuthin' left ter do but bid ye farewell. Ye've done made yoreself a hard bed. In a fashion I honors ye fer hit, but I pities ye, too. Ye've done signed yore own doom."

"I thanks ye," said Bear Cat gravely. "But I hain't askin' pity yit."

In the yard where so many feet had been tramping there was now total emptiness. The flock of geese still waddled and

squawked down by the creek, but by the gate Bear Cat stood alone—a man who had forfeited his heritage.

The sun was setting and the ache of recent wounds and fatigue was accentuated by the rawness of approaching twilight. Beyond the trickle of prattling water, went up the frowning and unchanging hills, bleak and sinister with their ancient contempt for change. Bear Cat Stacy threw back his head.

"They don't see nothin' in me but brag an' foolishness," he bitterly admitted, "but afore God I aims ter show 'em thet thar's more in me then thet!"

Already a plan for the first chapter of his undertaking had fully evolved itself and it was a thing which must be launched to-night—but first he meant to make a sad pilgrimage. He would not go in, but he would stand outside Blossom's window—perhaps for the last time. Something drew him there—a compelling force and he remained an hour. When he turned away cold beads of nervous sweat stood on his temples.

Suddenly he saw two figures cross the road and plunge furtively into the laurel, and they moved as men move who have a nefarious intent. They were Dog Tate and Joe Sanders; the men to whom, last night, he had fled for succor, and at once he divined their purpose.

Bear Cat, too, turned into the timber and, by hurrying over the broken face of the slopes, intercepted their more cautious course. But when he stood out in the path and confronted them, it was no longer into friendly faces that he looked.

"Dog, I wants ter hev speech with ye," he said quietly, and the moonshiner, who had instinctively thrust forward his rifle, stood with a finger that trembled in impatience while it nursed the trigger.

"Don't hinder me, Bear Cat," he barked warningly, "I'm in dire haste—an' I've got severe work ahead of me."

"I knows right well what thet work air, Dog." The young man spoke calmly. "I reckon hit's a thing ye gave me yore pledge not many hours back ye'd put by twell another day an' I hain't freed ye from thet bond."

"Who air *you* ter talk of pledges?" The friend of last night savagely snarled his question with a scorn that shook his voice. "You thet this day broke yore faith with yore blood ter line up with raiders an' revenuers!"

Bear Cat's face whitened with an anger which he rigidly repressed.

"Ye succored me last night when I needed ye sore," came the steady response, "an' I'm willin' ter look over these hardships of speech, but a pledge given is a pledge thet's got ter stand till hit's done been given back."

Tate's eyes were blazing with a dangerous passion and his rage made his words come pantingly:

"Hit's too late fer preachin' texts, Bear Cat. We believed in ye yestiddy. Ter-day we spits ye outen our mouths. Ye kain't call us ter war one day an' send us back home, unsatisfied, ther next. My pappy's kerchief's right hyar in my pocket now—an' ther blood thet's on hit calls out ter me louder then yore fine palaverin's!"

Bear Cat Stacy's rifle had been swinging in his hand. He made no effort to raise it.

"When ye calls me a traitor ter my blood, ye lies, Dog," he said with a hard evenness of tone. "I reckon ye knows what hit means ter hold a bitter hate—I've done read thet much in yore face, but I holds a deeper an' blacker hate then ye ever dreamt of—an' I've done put hit aside—fer a reason thet meant more ter me then *hit* did."

Through the excitement that made the other's chest heave Turner recognized a bewildered curiosity and he went on.

"I hain't never stood by afore an' suffered no man ter give me names like you've jest called me. I reckon I won't hardly never do hit ergin—but I owes ye gratitude fer last

night an' I'm goin' ter owe ye more. Ye hain't a-goin' ter lay-way Kinnard Towers this night, Dog. Ye're a-goin' along with me ter do what I bids ye."

"Like hell I am!" snarled Tate, though in the next breath, without realizing the anti-climax of his question, he added, "Why am I?"

"Because I've got a bigger aim then sneakin' murders an' I aims ter hev men like you holp me. Because when we finishes our job yore children air goin' ter dwell in safety." He talked on fervently and despite himself the man with his finger on the trigger listened.

It all seemed very fantastic and radical to Dog Tate, yet there was such a hypnotic power in the voice and manner that he lowered his cocked rifle.

"Bear Cat," he said with a sort of bewilderment, "thet talk sounds powerful flighty ter me, but if ye air outen yer right mind I reckon I kain't kill ye—an' ef thar's a solitary grain of sense in what ye says God knows I'd like ter hev ye show hit ter me."

The shadows lengthened across the valleys and the peaks grew cloudily somber as Bear Cat Stacy talked. He was trying for his first convert and his soul went into his persuasiveness. He had himself done first what he asked of others. His still was destroyed for a bigger aim. It was a new and more effective warfare which required certain sacrifices.

A slow grin of sardonic amusement spread eventually over the face of Dog Tate. He put down his rifle.

"Then ye means thet hit hain't a-goin' ter be jest preachin'? Kinnard hain't goin' ter escape scot-free? Because I've always figgered he belonged ter me."

"So many men figgers thet," retorted Stacy dryly, "thet in ther time of final reckonin' thar won't be enough of him ter go round. I aims ter hang him in Marlin Town, with his own jedge passin' sentence on him."

Dog Tate drew a clay pipe from his pocket and kindled it. His eyes glowed with a pleasurable anticipation.

"Wa'al, now, es ter thet blockade still of mine," he drawled reflectively. "My old woman's been faultin' me erbout hit fer a long spell, an' seekin' ter prevail on me ter quit. She 'lows hit'll cost more'n hit comes ter afore we gits through an' I misdoubts she hain't fur wrong." He chewed on the pipe-stem yet a while longer, then suddenly he announced: "I reckon thet still don't owe me nothin' much. Hit's about wore out anyhow. Let's go over thar an' bust her up—an' straightway start hell a-poppin'."

Bear Cat Stacy glanced keenly at Joe Sanders who had remained a pace or two apart, holding his counsel with a face that bore no index to his sentiments. "Air you with us, too, Joe?" he demanded. "This-hyar business hain't a-goin' ter be no frolic. We don't want no men thet don't aim ter go through with hit."

Joe scratched his head, speaking cautiously. "I works fer wages myself. Dog hires me—albeit I'd ruther do any other fashion of labor. Howsoever, I don't aim ter make common cause with no revenuers. I hain't no Judas priest."

"Revenuers—hell!" exploded Bear Cat Stacy. "I don't make no common cause with 'em nuther. I'm willin' ter let ther govern*ment* skin hits own skunks."

For so portentous a decision, Joe Sanders gave a disproportionately laconic reply. "All right then. Ye kin count me in es fur es ye goes."

It was a night of fitful moonlight, breaking through a scud of windy clouds, only to be swallowed again, when by the flare of a lantern the three men stood over the ruins of what had been a crude distillery—its erstwhile proprietor grinning sardonically as he surveyed the completeness of his vandalism.

"I reckon thet finishes ye up, old whiskey-snake," he commented in grim obituary. "I boughten thet piece of copper

offen a feller thet murdered a revenuer ter save hit—so hit's due fer punishment."

"Thet's all right so far es hit goes," Bear Cat reminded him crisply, "but hit don't go far enough. We've got more work ter do yit. When men wakes up ter-morrer, they've got ter hev proof thet I've started out in earnest." Around the fire the three squatted on their heels, and talked in low voices.

"I knows of three more stills sca'cely more'n a whoop an' a holler distant from hyar es ye mout say," volunteered Joe Sanders. "I hain't settin' hit out fer gospel fact, but I've heered hit norated round about, thet Mark Tapper don't even try ter molest these stills on account of a deal he's made with Kinnard."

"Wa'al, Kinnard hain't got no bit in *my* mouth," growled Dog. "Whar air these places at, Joe?"

Sanders was now innoculated with the spirit of crusade—not so much as a reform as a new and impudent adventure—and his lips parted in a contented grin that showed his uneven teeth.

"A couple on 'em air closed down fer ther time-bein'," he enlightened, "but ther worms air thar. By ter-morrer Kinnard'll jest about hev passed on a warnin' an' they'll be watched, but ter-night hit's cl'ar sleddin'. A man kin bust 'em up single handed an' nuver be suspicioned. Hit'll tek all three of us tergether ter manage ther third one though, because *thet* still b'longs ter little Jake Kinnard an' Jake or his law-kin Mat Branham'll be on watch—mebby both of 'em."

Bear Cat's eyes brightened at this prospect of immediate action. "Little" Jake, so dubbed after mountain custom because his father still lived and bore the same given name, was a nephew of Kinnard Towers, and despite his diminutive title prided himself on his evil and murderous repute. He was a "notched-gun" man and high in his uncle's favor.

"Air they runnin' thet kittle in ther same place es they used to a year back?" demanded Turner, and Joe nodded as

he replied. "Ther same identical spot. Hit's, as a man mout say, right in ther shadder of ther Quarterhouse hitself."

Bear Cat Stacy was on his feet and his words came with the animation of a daring plan already formulated.

"Now hearken. . . . You two boys look atter them idle stills. . . . I aims ter manage this t'other one—by myself."

Dog Tate raised a hand in remonstrance, but Turner beat down argument with a contemptuous laugh. "I'm in haste because I'm a-wearied," he explained, "an' thet's ther speediest way ter git through an' lay down. I'll be at yore house afore sun-up, an' I reckon ye kin hide me out thar fer a few hours while I sleeps, kain't ye?"

"I kin take keer of ye—ef ye gits thar alive," affirmed the first recruit. "But hit looks severely dubious ter me."

Turner tightened his belt, but as he was leaving he wheeled to direct: "This worm of your'n an' ther t'other two hes got ter be hangin' in ther highway by daylight. I aims ter hang Jake Kinnard's right up erginst ther stockade of ther Quarterhouse."

As he scuttled through the dark timber the moon broke out at intervals, making of the road a patch-work of shadow and light. Last night he was hiding out only from the revenue agent and his informers. To-night he had flung his challenge to the vested rights of tradition and forfeited clan sponsorship. Every hand was against him.

His way carried him past the Quarterhouse itself and near the hitching-rack he halted, crouched low against the naked briars and dead brush-wood. Among the several beasts fastened there was a gray horse more visible than its darker companions, which he recognized as belonging to Black Tom Carmichael. Yet Black Tom had been otherwise mounted to-day when he had ridden away from Little Slippery with Kinnard Towers.

Obviously the fresh animal stood saddled for a new journey—probably a mission of general warning. Bear Cat

drew back into the invisibility of the steep hillside to watch, and it was only a short time before the door of Kinnard's own house, on the opposite slope, opened. Towers himself he only glimpsed, for the chieftain did not make a practice of offering himself as a target by night, framed in lighted doorways.

But Black Tom came down the path to mount and ride away, and Bear Cat struck off at right angles through the woods. The horseman must follow the road he had taken to the next crossing, and the pedestrian could reach the place more quickly by the footpath. Having arrived, he lay belly-down on a titanic bowlder in time to hear the cuppy thud of unshod hooves on the soft road and, a little later, to see Black Tom dismount and hitch.

Carmichael turned into the woodland trail without suspicion. He was on territory which should be safe, and he walked with a noisy carelessness that swallowed up what little sound Turner Stacy could not avoid as he followed.

By the simple device of playing shadow to the man in front Bear Cat drew so near to the still that he could both see and hear, though the last stage of the journey through the interlocked thickets he accomplished with such minute caution that Black Tom sat by the fire with a tin cup of white liquor in his hand before his follower lay ensconced a stone's throw away. It was a nest of secrecy, buried from even a near view by the tops of felled hemlock which would hold their screen of foliage throughout the winter.

Edging the narrow circle of firelight, walls of rock and naked trees were sketched flat and grotesque against the inky void beyond them. Two figures in muddied overcoats huddled close to the blaze, and Black Tom was reciting the events of the day over on Little Slippery.

"They didn't p'intedly aim ter harm Bear Cat Stacy last night—he jest run inter ther ruction. Hit war ther furriner thet Kinnard wanted kilt."

"Drink all ye craves an' tell me ther whole story," amicably invited "Little" Jake Kinnard.

"I aimed ter warn ye erbout this Bear Cat's threat ter rip out stills—albeit we deems hit ter be mostly brash talk," Carmichael explained. "We didn't invite no trouble with ther Stacys. Kinnard fixed hit with Mark Tapper ter hev old Lone jailed so thet ther thing could be done easy like—an' peaceable—but Bear Cat come a-beltin' back an' hit went awry."

The simmering fury of his blood boiled over in Turner's veins while he listened. All the duplicity of to-day now stood revealed and positive. All his suspicions were proven. With two quick shots from his rifle he could put an end to both these assassins, but he remained rigid. "No, by God," he mused. "I aims ter do hit on ther gallows-tree—not from ambush."

After a period Black Tom rose, making ready to leave, and now Turner Stacy had need to hasten. The point at which he wished to await Kinnard's second in command was the outer end of a narrow defile which served as a sort of gateway to the place. Centuries of trickling water-tongues had licked it out of the rock walls and it was so narrow that two men could not pass through it abreast.

But Carmichael paused for further converse on the edge of his departure, and Turner waited for some minutes, shivering because he had taken off his coat, before his ears told him of the approach of a single pair of heavy feet.

The scudding raggedness of the clouds had been swept into wider tatters now and the moon was steadier though still not brightly clear. Bear Cat stooped, like a crouching panther, just outside the elbow of the rock wall, holding his coat as a *matador* holds the flag in the course of a charging bull. Then a bulky figure emerged and there followed a sweep of heavy cloth; an attempted outcry which ended in a stifled gurgle, and Carmichael went down, borne under the impact

of an unexpected onslaught, with his breath smothered in an enmeshing tangle.

For a moment Bear Cat knelt on the prostrate figure which had been stunned by its heavy fall, twisting the coat about the face and throat; then, experimentally, he eased the suffocation—and there was no hint of attempted outcry.

A few minutes later Black Tom opened his eyes and peered through the darkness. To his dizzy eyes matters seemed confused. His mouth was securely gagged and, at his back, his wrists were so stiffly pinioned that when he struggled to free them he felt the nasty bite of metal—evidently a buckle.

Above him he made out a pair of eyes that glittered down on him with an unpleasant truculence.

"Git up an' come on," ordered a voice. "Ye'll hev ter excuse me fer takin' yore rifle-gun an' pistol."

Slowly Tom rose and went, prodded into amenability by the muzzle of a rifle in the small of his back. When he had been thus goaded to the point where his horse was hitched his captor stripped saddle, bridle and halter of their straps and ropes, and set the beast free. Some of the commandeered tethers he employed to truss his prisoner up in a manner that left him as helplessly immovable as a mummy.

"Now I reckon ye'll hev ter wait fer me a leetle," said Bear Cat with brutal shortness. "Thar's still one more back thar ter attend ter."

Carrying with him bridle-reins and stirrup-straps, he disappeared again into the defile. Creeping for the second time with the best of his Indian-like stealth to the edge of the fire-lighted clearing, he saw Jake Kinnard standing, with his eyes on the embers, ten feet away from the rifle that was propped against a tree.

With a leap that sounded crashingly in the dead bushes Turner catapulted himself into the lighted area, and as the moonshiner wheeled, his hand going instinctively out toward

his weapon, he found himself covered from a distance of two yards.

"Hands overhead!—an' no noise," came the sharp warning, and had he been inclined to disobey the words there was an avid glitter in the eyes of the sudden visitor discouraging to argument.

"Lay down betwixt them two saplin's thar," was the next order, and foaming with futile rage, Jake glanced about wildly—and discreetly did as he was told.

Ten minutes later Turner rose from his knees, leaving behind him a man gagged and staked out, Indian fashion, with feet harnessed to one tree-trunk and hands to another.

Lying mute and harrowed with chagrin, he saw his copper coil battered into shapelessness and his mash vat emptied upon the ground. Then he saw Bear Cat Stacy disappear into the shadows, trophy-laden.

Dawn was near once more before Turner reached the Quarterhouse, and from the hitching-rack the last mount had been ridden away. Before him, still muffled against outcry, plodded Black Carmichael, seething with a fury which would ride him like a mania until he had avenged his indignities—but for the moment he was inoffensive.

At the place where the gray horse had been tethered, Turner lashed the rider. Above his head to an over-arching sycamore branch, he swung a maltreated coil of copper tubing. Then he turned, somewhat wearied and aching of muscle, into the timber again.

"I reckon now," he said to himself, "I kin go over thar an' lay down."

CHAPTER XXI

THREE times along the way, as the new crusader trudged on to Dog Tate's cabin, the late-setting moon glinted on queerly twisted things suspended from road-side trees—things unlike the fruit of either hickory or poplar.

A grim satisfaction enlivened his tired eyes, but it lingered only for a moment. Before them rose the picture of a girl sitting stricken by a bedside, and his brows contracted painfully with the memory.

From the window of Tate's cabin came a faint gleam of light, and, as he drew cautiously near, a figure rose wearily from the dark doorstep.

"I've been settin' up fer ye," announced Dog. "I mistrusted ye'd done met with mishap."

Inside the cabin crowded with sleeping and snoring figures, the host pointed to a loft under the shingles. "Ye'll hev ter bed in up thar," he said. "Don't come down ter-morrer twell I gives ye ther word. Right likely thar'll be folks abroad sarchin' fer ye. Me an' Joe aims ter blackguard ye no end fer bustin' up our still."

"Thet's what I 'lowed ter caution ye ter do," acquiesced Turner. "All I'm askin' now air a few hours of slumber."

He climbed the ladder with heavy limbs, and, falling on the floor among its litter of household effects, was instantly asleep.

* * * *

It was the habit of Kinnard Towers to rise early, even for a people of early risers, and on this morning he followed his customary routine. Last night he had slept restlessly because the events of the day had been stressful and uncertain, even if, in their summary, there had been an element of satisfaction.

So Kinnard pulled on his trousers and boots, still thinking

of yesterday, and crossed the hall to the room where Black Tom Carmichael slept.

Black Tom's bed had not been disturbed, and his door swung open. Towers roused two other members of his household and the three went out into the first mists of dawn to investigate. At the hitching-rack they halted in dismay and their jaws sagged.

The light was yet dim and ghostly, and at first the body that hung unconscious with hours of chilling and cramp had every appearance of lifelessness. A bitter anger broke out in Kinnard's face and for a time none of them spoke. Then from the chief's lips escaped an oath so fierce and profane that his men paused in their attempt at resuscitating the corpse-like figure, and following his eyes they saw the fresh insult which he had just discovered—a still-worm demolished and hanging high.

"Hell's clinkers!" stormed the leader. "What manner of deviltry air this?"

Restored, an hour later, by hot coffee and whiskey, Black Tom told his story, colorfully embellished with profane metaphor, and a squad went riding "hell-fer-leather" to the still of "Little" Jake Kinnard.

When the sun was fully revealed they were back again, with another man, feeble and half-frozen of body, but molten-hot of spirit to vouchsafe indignant evidence.

The cup of Towers' fury was brimming over, but before its first bitterness had been quaffed yet other heralds of tribulation arrived to pour in fresh wormwood. "Thar's still-house quiles hangin' all up an' down ther high-road," they lamented.

Kinnard looked at his henchman out of eyes somberly furious and his florid face turned a choleric purple.

"Thar hain't but one way ter treat sech a damn' pest es thet," he said slowly with the implacable manner of one passing final sentence. "He's got ter be kilt—an' kilt quick." But

a sudden reflection obtruded itself, snarling the simple edict with complication. "Hold on!" he added with a less assured finality. "Hev any stills been tampered with among his own folks—or air hit jest over hyar?"

"We hain't heered much from ther yon side yit," admitted the news-bearers. "Thar's one thet Dog Tate used ter run, though, thet's hangin' high as Haaman. Dog's a kinsman of his'n but he dwells nigh ter hyar."

"Hev some fellers ride over thar an' talk with him," commanded Towers with prompt efficiency. "Ef I war sure they wouldn't all stand behind him, I'd take a crowd of men over thar an' hang him in front of his own house. Yestiddy they didn't seem ter hev much use fer him."

Of one thing, however, he failed to take adequate cognizance. That turning away of the clan, yesterday, in cool or angry repudiation had been less unanimous than it seemed. There were elders among them who had for years deplored the locked-in life of their kind and to whom this boy's effrontery secretly appealed. None of their own heritage and breed had ever before dared to raise his voice against forcible scourging out of a tolerated practice—but that did not mean that all men sanctioned it in their hearts.

So as the Stacys had scattered they had discussed the matter, guardedly save where the speaker was sure of his auditor, and Kinnard would have been astonished to know how many of them said, "I reckon mebby ther boy is fittified—but ef he could do what he seeks ter, hit would sartain sure be a God's blessin' ter these hills."

"I don't see no diff'rence atween what he aims at, an' what them damn' revenuers seeks ter do," suggested a young man who had fallen in with Joe Stacy after the gathering and rode knee to knee with him. "Myself I don't foller nuther makin' hit ner drinkin' hit. Hit kilt my daddy an' my maw raised me up ter hate ther stuff—but I'm jest tellin' how hit looks ter me."

"Sim," said Joe Stacy gravely, "I counseled Turner ter put aside this notion—because I misdoubted hit would mean his death, but ef ye don't see no difference atween him an' a revenuer ye're jest a plain idjit—an' I don't mean no offense neither. Ther revenuer works fer blood money. Bear Cat hain't seekin' no gain but ter bring profit ter his people. Ther revenuer slips up with knowledge thet he gains by busted faith an' spies. Bear Cat's done spoke out open an' deeclared hisself."

The young man reined in his horse abruptly.

"I'm obleeged ter ye fer enlightenen' me," he said with blunt directness. "I'll ask ye ter hold yore counsel about this matter. I aims ter go back thar an' work with him."

A slow smile spread over the ragged lips of Bear Cat's uncle. He made no criticism, but one might have gathered that he was not displeased.

Back at Lone Stacy's house on the morning that Kinnard Towers was awakening to conditions, were gathered a handful of men. They lounged shiftlessly as though responding to no object save casual curiosity. They were cautious to express neither approbation nor disapproval, but intangibly the threads of sympathy and hostility were unraveling. Those who were the steadier of gaze, clearer of pupil and fitter of brawn, inclined toward Bear Cat and his crusade, and, conversely, those who wore the stamp of reddened eye and puffed socket gave back sneering scowls to the mention of his name.

But all alike crowded around, when a traveler, who had elected to cross the mountain from Marlin Town by night, paused, puffed with the importance of one bearing news.

"Hev ye folks done heered ther tidin's?" he demanded, shifting to a sidewise postion in his saddle. "Bear Cat Stacy's been raidin' stills. Thar's a copper worm hangin' right at ther Quarterhouse door—an' trees air bloomin' with others all along ther high road."

The murmur was half a growl—for the group was not without its blockader or two—and half pure tribute to prompt achievement.

"Nor thet hain't all by half," went on the traveler, relating with the gusto of a true climax how Black Tom had been bound to a hitching-rack and Jake Kinnard staked out by his demolished mash kettle. This was pure exploit—and whatever its motive the mountain man loves exploit.

Moreover, these sufferers from Bear Cat's wrath were men close to the hated Kinnard Towers. Faces that had brooded yesterday grinned today.

* * * *

Kinnard's squad reached the house of Dog Tate while the morning was yet young, searching each cabin along the way, in the hope that last night's raider might be still hiding in their own terrain.

They found Joe Sanders sitting on the doorstep, with the morose aspect of a man deprived of his avocation in life. The wintry hillsides were no moodier than his eyes, and the sullen skies no more darkly lowering.

But Dog Tate himself was loquacious to a fault. He raved with a fury so unbridled that it suggested lunacy. Bear Cat had come to his place wounded and had been succored. Twenty-four hours later he had come there again treasonably to repay that service by ripping out an unguarded still. Henceforth the Stacy call might remain eternally unanswered, and be relegated to perdition for all of him.

"Dog," suggested the leader of the squad, "we've done been askin' leave ter kinderly hev a look inter dwellin' houses —in case Bear Cat's still layin' concealed over hyar. I reckon ye hain't hardly got no objection, hev ye?"

"Does ye 'low thet I'd be hidin' out ther man thet raided me?" The host put his question with a fine irony, and the reply was apologetic.

"Not sca'cely. Hit's jest so thet we kin tell Kinnard, we didn't pass no house by, thet's all."

The speaker and the ex-moonshiner were standing at the threshold of the log shack. It was a place of a single, windowless room with a lean-to kitchen—and above was the loft reached by a trap and ladder.

"Come right in then," acceded Dog Tate with disarming readiness. "I hain't got no *excess* of love fer Kinnard—but I've got yit less fer still-busters."

Far back where the shingle roof dropped steeply from ridge pole to edge was a murky recess hidden behind a litter of old bedding, piled up potatoes and onions. Silently listening and mercifully blotted into shadow there, Bear Cat Stacy crouched with rifle-barrel thrust forward and his finger caressing the trigger.

The squad-leader looked about the place with perfunctory eye and then, seeing the ladder, set his foot upon its lowest rung.

Dog Tate felt a sudden commotion of hammering pulses, but his lids did not flicker nor his mouth alter its line. Quite unostentatiously, however, his wife moved toward the front door and stood there blankly expressionless. Also, Dog laid his hand idly on the ladder as the visitor climbed upward. If the search proved embarrassing he meant to kick the support from under the Towers minion, and his wife meant to bar the door for siege.

But the intruder went only high enough to thrust his head into the overhead darkness while a match flared and went out. He had seen nothing, and as he stumped down again the poised finger relaxed on the rifle trigger, and the Tates breathed free.

"I'm obleeged ter ye," said the searching lieutenant. "Ef ye wants ter start up yore still ergin, I reckon ye'll be safe. He won't be runnin' wild fer long nohow."

* * * *

The Quarterhouse emissaries were raking the hills with an admirable thoroughness, running like a pack in full cry on the man trail, but they did not again come so near the fringes of success as when they missed the opportunity at Dog Tate's house.

In spite of a watchfulness that gave eyes to the hills and ears to the timber, their quarry left that house and went to his own.

He had no intention of making the mad effort to remain there. The wild tangle of cliff and forest was his safest refuge now—but there were two things to be done at home. He wished to have for companionship in exile his "Lincoln, Master of Men," and he wished to learn if out of the wholesale desertion of yesterday there had not come back to him even one or two followers.

So that afternoon he slipped, undetected by his trailers, into and out of his father's house; and there followed him, though each went singly and casually to escape detection, some eight or ten men, who henceforth were to be his secret followers and, he hoped, the nucleus of a larger force.

The next morning in both Stacy and Towers territory, hickories and walnuts and sycamores burst into copper fruitage. The hills were alive with armed search-parties, liquor-incited and vowing vengeance, yet through their cordons he moved like some invisible and soundless creature, striking and escaping while they raged.

At ever-changing points of rendezvous he met and instructed his mysterious handful of faithful supporters, struck telling blows—made fresh raids and seemingly evaporated.

From all that Towers could learn, it appeared that Bear Cat Stacy was operating as a lone bandit. Yet the ground he seemed to cover single-handed was so wide of boundary and his success so phenomenal that already he was being hallowed, in country-side gossip, with legendary and heroic qualities. In that Towers read a serious menace to his own

prestige; until he ground his teeth and swore sulphurously. He organized a larger force of human hounds and fired them more hotly with the incentive of liquor and greed for promised reward. The doors of Old Lone Stacy's house, tenanted now only by the wife of the prisoner and the mother of the refugee, were endlessly watched by unseen eyes. Around the cabin where Jerry Henderson lay lingering with a tenuous hold on life, lounged the men posted there by Joe Stacy, and back in the timbered slopes that frowned down upon its roof crouched yet other shapes of butter-nut brown; shapes stationed there at the behest of the Quarterhouse.

Going in and out among these would-be avengers and learning all their plans, by dint of a pretendedly bitter hatred of Bear Cat Stacy, were such men as Dog Tate and Joe Sanders, spying upon the spies.

Old Bud Jason at his little tub-mill and Uncle Israel at his general store secretly nodded their wise old heads and chuckled. They knew that, hushed and undeclared, a strong sentiment was being born for the boy who was outwitting scores of time-seasoned murder hirelings. But they shook their heads, too—realizing the deadly odds of the game and its tragic chances.

One afternoon after a day sheeted in cold rain that sometimes merged into snow, Bear Cat crept cautiously toward the sagging door of the abandoned cabin which had, on another night, housed Ratler Webb. It had been a perilously difficult day for the man upon whose head Towers had set the price of a river-bottom farm. Like a hard-run fox he had doubled back and forth under relentless pursuit and gone often to earth. The only things they needed with which to harry him further were bloodhounds.

Now in the later afternoon he came to the cabin and sought a few minutes' shelter there against the penetrating misery of rain and sloppy snow that thawed as it fell. He dared not light a fire, and must not relax the vigilance of his outlook.

Just before sunset Bear Cat saw a man edging cautiously through the timber, moving with a shadowy furtiveness—and recognized Joe Sanders.

The newcomer slipped through the rotting lintels, bringing a face stamped with foreboding.

"Ye kain't stay hyar," announced the excited voice. "I don't hardly know whar ye *kin* go to nuther, onlessen' ye kin make hit back ter Dog Tate's dwellin'-house by ther hill-trail."

"Tell me all ye knows, Joe," directed Stacy with a steadying calmness, and the other went on hurriedly:

"They've done picked up yore trail—an' lost hit ergin—a couple of miles back. They 'lows ye hain't fur off, an' thar's two score of 'em out huntin'—all licker-crazed but yit not disabled none. Some of 'em 'lows ter come by hyar. I'm with a bunch thet's travelin' a diff'rent route. They're spreadin' out like a turkey gobbler's tail feathers an' combin' this territory plumb close. Above all don't go to'rds home. Hit's thet way thet they's most numerous of all. I surmised I'd find ye hyar an' I slipped by ter warn ye."

"I'm obleeged ter ye, Joe. What's thet ye've got thar?" The last question was prompted by the gesture with which Saunders, as if in afterthought, thrust his hand into his coat pocket.

"Hit hain't nuthin' but a letter Brother Fulkerson bid me give ter ye—but thar hain't no time ter read hand-write now. Every minute's wuth countless letters."

But Turner Stacy was ripping the envelope. Already he had recognized the clear, precise hand which had been the fruit of Blossom's arduous efforts at self-education.

"Don't tarry, man! I cautions ye they're already makin' ready ter celebrate yore murder," expostulated the messenger, but Bear Cat did not seem to hear him. In the fading light he was reading and rereading, forgetful of all else. Joe Sanders, fixing him with a keen and impatient scrutiny, noticed

how gaunt were his cheeks and how hollow-socketed his eyes. Yet as he began the letter there was a sudden and eager hopefulness in his face which faded into misery as he finished.

"A famed doctor came up from Louisville," wrote Blossom. "He's done all that could be done. He says now that only Jerry's great courage keeps life in him and that can't avail for long. He hasn't been able to talk—except for a few words. The longest speech was this: 'Send word to Bear Cat—that I'm honester than he thinks. . . . I want to die with his friendship . . . or I can't rest afterwards. . . .' He looked like he wanted to tell something else and he named your father and your Uncle Joe Stacy, but he couldn't finish. He keeps saying 'Stacy, you don't understand.' What is it, that you don't understand, Turney? Can't you slip over just long enough to shake hands with him? He wants you to do it—and he's dying—and I love him. For my sake can't you come? Your mother says you came once just to get a book—won't you do that much for me? Blossom Henderson."

Joe Sanders shuffled his feet in poignant disgust for the perilous procrastination. Here was a man whose life hung on instant flight, yet he stood with eyes wide and staring, holding before them a silly sheet of paper. His lips whispered, "Blossom Henderson—*Henderson*—not Fulkerson no more!"

Then a wave of black resentment swept Bear Cat's face and he licked his dry lips. "Joe," he said absently, "I hates him! I kain't shake his hand. I tells ye I kain't do hit."

"Whose hand?—don't shake hit, then," retorted Sanders irritably, and, with a sudden start as though he had been rudely awakened while prattling in his sleep, Bear Cat laughed bitterly.

"Hit don't make no difference," he added shortly. "I war kinderly talking ter myself. I reckon I'd better be leavin'."

Hurrying through the timber, toward Dog Tate's house, Turner's mind was in a vexed quandary and after a little he irresolutely halted. His forehead was drawn and his lips were

tight. "Blossom Henderson!" he muttered. "God knows I took plentiful risks thet ye mout w'ar thet name—an' yit—yit when I reads hit, seems like hit drives me plumb ravin' mad!"

From the tangle of dead briars the cold rain dripped desolately. A single smear of lurid red was splashed across the west beyond the silhouetted ridges.

"They're aimin' ter head me off ef I goes to'rds home," he reflected in a bitter spirit. "An' he wants thet I should fight my way through all them enemies ter shake his hand—so thet he kin die easy. I reckon hit don't make no manner of diff'rence how hard I dies myself."

He covered his face with his hands and when he took them away he altered his course, setting his steps in the direction of his own house.

"She said—fer *her* sake," he repeated in a dazed voice, touched with tenderness. "I reckon I've got ter undertake hit."

Never before had the woods been so efficiently picketed. Never had the net of relentless pursuit been so tight-drawn and close of mesh. For a long distance he eluded its entanglement though at times, as it grew dark, he saw the glimmer of lanterns whose portent he understood.

But finally the clouds broke and a cold moon shone out to aid the pack and cut to a forlorn hope the chances of the quarry.

As Bear Cat went creeping from shadow to shadow he could hear faint sounds of pursuit closing in upon him. He came at length upon a narrow road that must be crossed and for a while he bent low, listening, then stole forward, reassured.

But as he reached the farther side, the black solidity of a hill-side broke not in one but in several tongues of flame and the bark of three rifles shattered the quiet.

Bear Cat doubled back and cut again into the timber which

he had left, running now to put a margin of distance between himself and the greater numbers. That fusillade and its echoes would bring other rifles and reinforcements.

After a few pantingly stressful minutes he found himself standing at the lip of a steep bluff, and a roar of water beneath warned him that the creek, some twenty feet below, had been swollen from a trickling thread to a seething caldron.

He gazed questioningly about, gauging his chances with swift calculation, since there was no time for indecision.

"I aimed ter come, Blossom," he breathed between his teeth, "but I've done failed!" He stepped out to look over the ledge and for a moment his figure was silhouetted in the open light. Then again the curtain of blue-black shadow was shot through with fiery threads and a rifle barked sharply, trailing a broken wake of echoes.

Bear Cat Stacy's two hands went high above his head, his right still clutching his rifle. He swayed for the duration of a breath, rocking on his feet, then plunged forward and outward.

The next morning, no worms were found hanging in the highway, but, back at the Quarterhouse, Kinnard Towers turned in his hand a battered hat that had been retrieved from floating drift.

"Yes, I reckon thet's his hat," he commented after a close scrutiny. "I reecollect seein' thet raw-hide thong laced round hit, endurin' his speech over thar. Wa'al, he elected ter go chargin' amuck—an' he's done reaped his harvest."

CHAPTER XXII

THE story of Turner's death at unknown hands spread in the next few days like wild fire.

Whatever may have been the lack of sympathy for the young man's undertakings of reform, it was now only remembered that he was a Stacy who had been "dogged to his death" by Towers' minions, and ugly rumblings of threat awoke along the water courses where his kinsmen dwelt.

It was voiced abroad that Jerry Henderson could not outlive that week: that when he died, the body of Bear Cat Stacy would be buried with him, and that, from those two graves, the Stacys would turn away to wreak a sanguinary vengeance.

Yet all this was the sheerest sort of rumor. No man had proof that a Towers rifle had killed Turner—the man to whom his clan had looked for leadership. No man had seen the body which his family was said to be holding for that dramatic consignment to the earth.

But in part the report found fulfilment. On Sunday afternoon Blossom leaned over the quilt-covered figure of her dying husband to realize that he was no longer dying but dead.

"Speak ter me, Jerry," she cried as she dug her nails into her palms. "Speak ter me—jest one time more."

She sought to call out to her father, but her lips refused the service, and as she came to her feet she stretched out her hands and crumpled, insensible, to the floor.

Brother Fulkerson went that afternoon to the saw-mill at the back of Uncle Israel's store and stood by as the storekeeper himself sawed planks and knocked together the crude box which must serve Jerry Henderson as a casket. Later across the counter he bought some yards of coarse cloth cut

from a bolt of black calico, which was to be his daughter's pathetic attempt at mourning dress.

The afternoon of the funeral was unspeakably sullen and dismal. Clouds of leaden dreariness hung to the bristling mountains, themselves as gray as slate. Cold skies promised snow and through the bleak nakedness of the forest whined the dirge-like complaint of a gusty wind.

To the unkempt place of briar-choked and sunken graves, crawled a dingy procession.

Blossom would have preferred going with her dead unattended save by her father, but that mountain usage forebade. A wedding or a funeral could not be so monopolized in a land where there is frugally little to break daily monotony. This funeral above all others, belonged in part to the public, made pregnant with interest by the story that two bodies instead of one would be laid to rest. The question of how Bear Cat Stacy had come to his death would be answered over his open grave, and men would know at the falling of the last clod whether they should return quietly to their homes or prepare for the sterner task of reprisal.

Kinnard Towers must know, too, what happened there, and must know it speedily, though to go himself or to send one of his recognized lieutenants was beyond the question. Yet his plans were carefully laid. Those few nondescripts who bore the repute of being Stacy sympathizers, while in fact they were Towers informers, were to be present; and along the miles of "slavish roughs" between Quarterhouse and burial-ground, like runners in a relay race, were other heralds. When the news began to come from the place it would travel fast. Sitting grimly behind the closed stockade of the Quarterhouse and surrounded now not only by a body-guard but by some scores of fighting men, the old intriguer anxiously awaited the outcome.

Long before the hour for the services had arrived men, as drab and neutral in color as the sodden skies, and women

wrapped in shawls of red and blue, began to gather from hither and yon over roads mired to the prohibition even of "jolt-wagons." They came on foot or on muddied mules and horses with briar-tangled manes and tails—and having arrived, they waited, shuffling their weary feet against frost-bite and eddying in restless currents.

Two men were still at work with shovels and they had spread out their excavation so wide, in removing slabs of unbreakable rock, that the place might have been a single, double or even a triple grave.

The wind moaned as murky clouds began to spit snow, and then on the gulch-washed road which climbed steeply, a little procession was glimpsed in the distance.

The men fondled their guns, but the cortège was lost again to view behind a screen of cedars and until it turned finally on the level of the graveyard itself, its details remained invested with the suspense of expectancy.

At the fore, when it arrived, was Brother Fulkerson astride his old mare, and on a pillion behind him rode the "Widder Henderson," the whiteness of her thin face startlingly accentuated by the unrelieved lines of her black calico gown. Under her erstwhile vivid eyes lay dark rings of suffering, but she held her head rigid and gazed straight before her.

The cortège came without the proper hush of due solemnity, for the rough coffin that held Jerry Henderson's body was borne on a fodder sledge and the stolid team of oxen that drew it required constant and vociferous shouts and goading as they strained unwillingly against their yokes. After the sledge trailed a dozen neighbors, afoot and mounted; all plastered with mud—but the crowd caught its breath and broke into a low murmur. There was only one casket!

As the evangelist dismounted and lifted his daughter down, the men who were there as observers for Kinnard Towers sought places near enough to hear every syllable.

Yet when the elderly preacher began to speak, while his

daughter stood with the dull apathy of one only half realizing, the faces of the crowd mirrored a sort of sullen disappointment. For them the burial of the man who was, after all, well-nigh a stranger, was secondary in interest. It was in every material respect touching their lives and deeper interests, Bear Cat's funeral they had come to attend. But on that topic the bearded shepherd meant to give them no satisfaction. So far he had made no mention of Bear Cat, and now he was concluding with the injunction: "Let us pray."

But as he bent his head, a woman standing near the foot of the grave raised a hand that trembled with all the violence of superstitious fear. From her thin lips broke a half-smothered shriek, not loud but eerie and disconcerting, and she shrilled in terrorized notes, "Air thet a specter I sees thar?"

Many eyes followed the pointed finger and again a dismayed chorus of inarticulate sound broke from the crowd. Just behind Blossom—herself ghostlike in her white rigidness—had materialized a figure that had not been there before. It was a gaunt figure whose face these people had seen before only bronzed and aggressive. Now the cheek-bones stood out in exaggerated prominence and the flesh was bloodlessly gray. Though Bear Cat Stacy was present in the flesh his sudden materialization there might well have startled a superstitious mind into the thought that he had come not only from a bed of illness but from one of death. Ignoring the sensation he had created, he spoke in a whisper to the minister, and Brother Fulkerson made a quiet announcement.

"Hit hain't no ghost, sister. Turner Stacy hes been sore sick an' nigh ter death, but hit's pleased ther Almighty ter spare him. Let us pray."

A man near the grave began quietly working his way to the outer fringes of the gathering, and when he had escaped immediate observation, he went with hot haste. Kinnard must know of this.

He had detected an undernote in that general murmur of astonishment, which was clearly one of satisfaction. The Stacys had derived pleasure in this ocular proof that Bear Cat was not dead.

As the preacher said "Amen" Bear Cat bent tensely forward and caught both of Blossom's hands in his own. "I kain't tarry," he said, "even fer a leetle spell, but I wanted ye ter know thet I done my best ter get hyar afore."

She looked at him with dazed eyes which under the intensity of his gaze slowly began to awaken into understanding.

Turner went on eagerly, "I started over hyar as soon as I got yore letter, but I was set upon an' wounded. I've been insensible well nigh ever sence then."

"Oh, Turney!" she whispered, as the grief which had held her in its thrall of unrelieved apathy suddenly broke into an overflow of tears. "Oh, Turney, I'm glad ye *tried*. He kept callin' fer ye. 'Peared like he wanted to tell ye somethin'." The clods were falling dully on the grave.

The crowd held back, fretting against the edict of decorum, as the voices rose in the miserable treble of song, to which two hounds added their anguished howls. At the last words of the verse, an instant clamor of question and discussion broke in eager storm—but Bear Cat had melted into the thicket at his back. With the same mystifying suddenness that had characterized his appearance, he had now disappeared.

Excited men rushed hither and thither, calling his name. They beat the woods and tramped the roads, but with as little result as though he had, in fact, appeared out of his grave and returned again to its hiding.

The story of that funeral was going with the pervasive swiftness of wind throughout the country-side. It was being mouthed over in dark cabins where toothless grannies and white-shocked grandsires wagged their heads and recalled the manner of Bear Cat's birth.

* * * *

When Joe Sanders had left Bear Cat that afternoon at the abandoned cabin, it had been with the impression that Stacy meant to take the path which he had advised; the only path that was not certainly closed to his escape, and seek refuge at Dog Tate's house. He had found an immediate opportunity to report that program to Dog himself, and Dog sought to make use of it in Bear Cat's service.

Tate, in recognition of his grievance as an outraged distiller, had been given the leadership of one of the largest of the search parties, which it was his secret purpose to lead far afield on a blind trail. Inasmuch as Bear Cat had been specifically cautioned against going in the direction of his own dwelling place, and yet since that would seem a logical goal, Dog had maneuvered his hunters into territory between the abandoned cabin and Little Slippery.

He himself had been in the woods across the waters of the suddenly swollen creek, when an outburst of rifle fire told him that something had gone wrong and brought him running back to the guidance of that musketry.

He arrived at the edge of the swirling, drift-encumbered water in time to see the silhouetted figure on the opposite bluff totter and plunge head first into the moonlit whirlpool. Dog knew that he was the only man on that side of the stream, but any effort to plunge in and try for a rescue would mean death to himself without hope of saving the man who had fallen. As he watched he made out what seemed to be the lifeless body come to the surface, to be swept in a rushing circle and, as chance would have it, to catch and hang lodged in a mass of floating dead-wood. The creek at ordinary times ran shallow and though it was gushing now beyond its normal borders it was still not wide. The deadwood swirled, raced forward, and fouled the out-jutting root of a giant sycamore.

Dog Tate crawled out along the precarious support of the slimy rootage and slowly drew the mass of drift into shallow

water. It was tedious work since any violent tugging might loosen the lightly held tangle and send the body floating away unbuoyed.

The night was all a thing of blue and silver moonlight and sooty shadows, but under the muddy bulwark at the base of the overhanging sycamore the velvet denseness of impenetrable black prevailed.

Once Dog saw figures outlined on the bluff from which Bear Cat had fallen, and had to lie still for the seeming of hours, trusting to the favor of the shadow.

Eventually he succeeded in drawing the mass of flotsam shoreward until he could wade in to the shallows, chancing the quicksands that were tricky there. Then he stumbled up the bank with his burden and deposited it between two bowlders where without daylight it would hardly be found. Dog was thinking fast, now.

He did not yet know whether he had saved a living man or retrieved a dead body, but his eagerness for investigation on that score must wait. Now he must rejoin the chase and turn it away from such dangerous nearness to its quarry.

So Tate ran down the bank and shouted. Voices replied and figures became visible on the farther shore.

"I seed him fall in," came the mendacious assurance of the man who was playing two parts. "I waded in atter him —but he went floatin' on down stream."

"Did he look like he mout be alive?" was the anxious query and the reply came as promptly. "He had every seemin' of bein' stone dead."

For a while they searched the banks, until, having discovered the hat, they decided to go back and let the final hunt for the body wait until morning.

But Dog had gone home and roused Joe Sanders, who had come in about midnight from another group of searchers, and the two of them had slipped back and recovered the limp burden—to find it still alive. Between midnight and dawn

they carried Bear Cat to the house of Bud Jason. The wound this time had glanced the skull, bringing unconsciousness but no fracture. The shock and the hours of lying wet in the freezing air had resulted in something like pneumonia, and for days Bear Cat had lain there in fever and delirium.

But the old miller had held grimly on despite the danger of discovery, and his woman had nursed with her rude knowledge of herbs, until the splendid reserve of strength, that had already been so prodigally taxed, proved itself still adequate. He had raved, they told him later, of shaking hands with someone whom he hated.

"Hev ye raided any more stills?" demanded Bear Cat when at last he had been able to talk, and Dog, who had been in every day, grinned:

"We 'lowed thet could wait a spell," he assured the crusader. "We had our hands right full es hit war."

But the morning following Jerry Henderson's funeral, two more coils of copper were discovered aloft, and one of the men who had composed Kinnard's relay of messengers was liberated at daybreak after spending several tedious and unsatisfactory hours lashed to a dog-wood sapling.

* * * *

If Kinnard Towers had raged before, now he fumed. Heretofore, it had been a condition of open war or one of acknowledged, even if precarious, peace. This was a mongrel situation which was neither the one nor the other, and every course was a dangerous one. The Stacys held their counsel, neither sanctioning the incorrigible black sheep of their flock in open declaration, nor yet totally relinquishing their right to avenge him, if an outside hand fell upon him. Meanwhile, the fiction of this young trouble-maker's charmed life was arousing the superstitious to its acceptance as a sort of powerful fetish.

The very name Bear Cat was beginning to fall from the lips of tow-headed children, with open-mouthed awe, like a

term of witchcraft, and this candid terror of children was, of course, only a reflection of the unconfessed, yet profound impression, stamped upon the minds of their elders.

"What ails everybody hyarabouts?" rumbled Kinnard over his evening pipe. "Heretofore when a man needed killin' he's been kilt—an' thet's all thar was ter hit. This young hellion walks inter sure death traps an' walks out ergin. He falls over a clift inter a ragin' torrent—an' slips through an army of men. In Satan's name, what air hit?"

Black Tom's rejoinder was not cheering: "Ef ye asks me, I think all these stories of witchcraft, backed up by his luck, hes cast a spell on folks. They thinks Bear Cat's in league with grave-yard spooks."

Kinnard knocked the ashes out of his pipe. His lips curled contemptuously. "An' es fer yoreself—does *you* take stock in thet damn' foolery, too?"

"I hain't talkin' erbout myself," retorted Tom sullenly. "Ye asked erbout what folks was cogitatin' an' I'm a-tellin' ye. If ye don't believe thar's a notion thet graves opens an' ther dead fights with him, jest go out an' talk ter these benighted hill-billies yoreself. If evidence air what ye wants, ye'll git a lavish of hit."

Those who were in Bear Cat's confidence constituted a close corporation, and they were not all, like Dog and Joe, men who mixed also with the enemy, gaining information while they railed against their own leader. There was talk of secret and mysterious meetings held at midnight by oath-bound men—to whom flowed a tide of recruits.

Kinnard believed these meetings to be a part of the general myth. His crude but effective secret service could gather no tangible evidence in support of their storied sessions.

One evening report drifted in to the Quarterhouse that some one had seen Bear Cat Stacy at a point not far distant, and that he had been boldly walking the open road—unaccompanied. Within the hour a party was out, supplied with jugs

and bottles enough to keep the vengeful fires well fueled throughout the night. It was an evil-looking squad, and its appearance was in no wise deceptive. Its members, all save one, had begun their evening at the Quarterhouse bar. The one exception was George Kelly, a young man recently married, who had gone there to talk other business with Towers. George had an instinctive tendency toward straightforwardness, but he had also an infirmity of character which caused him to follow where a more aggressive nature led—and he had fallen under Kinnard's domination. His small tract of tillable land was mortgaged, and Kinnard held over him the lash of financial supremacy. He could fight, but he could not argue, and when the unofficial posse was sent out that night, being in the place, he lacked the courage to refuse participation.

They had found the footprints of the fugitive and had met two men who claimed to have seen him in the flesh, but Bear Cat himself had eluded them and near midnight they halted to rest. They threw themselves down in a small rock-walled basin which was broken at one point by a narrow gorge, through which they had come. It was a good place to revel in after labor because it was so shut-in that the bonfire they kindled could not be far seen. The jugs were opened and passed around. It had set in to rain, and though they could endure that bodily discomfort while they had white liquor, their provident souls took thought against the rusting of their firearms. The guns were accordingly placed under a ledge of rock a few feet distant, all save one. Kelly lacking the buoyant courage of drunkenness, preferred to keep his weapon close at hand. He listened moodily and unresponsively to the obscene stories and ribald songs, which elicited thick peals of laughter from his companions. They had hunted hard, and now they were wassailing hard. The long march home would sober them so they need not restrain their appetites.

Some impulse led Kelly to raise his eyes from the sordid picture in the red waver of the fire and glance toward the doorlike opening of the gorge. The eyes remained fixed—and somehow the rifle on his knees did not come up, as it should have done. A figure stood there silently, contemptuously looking on, and it was as gaunt and gray as that of a foraging wolf. It was as lean and sinewy, too, and out of the face glowed a pair of eyes dangerously narrow and glittering.

Then with a scornful laugh the figure stepped forward, bending lithely from the waist, with two steel-steady hands gripping two automatic pistols at its front.

"War you boys a-sarchin' fer me?" demanded Bear Cat and the trailing voices, that had been drunkenly essaying close harmony, broke off mid-verse. "Stay right whar ye're at, every mother's son of ye!" came the sharp injunction. "The man thet stirs air a dead man. This hain't no play-party thet I've done come ter."

They sat suddenly silent, abruptly surly and helpless; all save one. George Kelly was still armed, and sitting somewhat apart. Beseechingly his companions sought by covert glance to signal him that he should avail himself of his armed advantage while they continued to distract the newcomer's attention.

Bear Cat's pistols broke out and two treasured jugs were shattered.

"Jim Towers," came the raspingly dictatorial order, "when ye goes back ter ther Quarterhouse ye kin tell Kinnard Towers thet Bear Cat Stacy hain't ter be captured by no litter of drunkards. Tell him he mout es well hire sober murderers' or else quit."

As Towers sat glowering and silent, Stacy's voice continued in its stinging contempt.

"You damned murder hirelings, does ye think thet I'm ter be tuck prisoner by sneakin' weasels like you?"

George Kelly had sat silent. Now he rose to his feet, and

Stacy ordered curtly. "Lay down thet gun, George. Ye're ther only man I'm astonished ter see hyar. I 'lowed ye war better then a hired assassin."

From someone came thick-tongued exhortation, "Git him, Kelly, you've got a gun. Git ther damn' parson."

In the momentary centering of Bear Cat's attention upon George, some one slipped with a cat-like furtiveness of motion back into the thicker darkness—toward the cached rifles.

Then a strange thing happened.

George Kelly wheeled, ignoring the order to drop his weapon, but instead of pointing it at the lone invader he leveled it across the fire-lit circle.

"Stop thet!" he yelled. "Leave them rifle-guns be or I aims ter shoot."

Surprise was following on surprise, and the half-befuddled faces of the drinkers went blank with perplexity and incredulity.

"What ther hell does ye mean? What did ye come out with us fer?" demanded a shrill voice, and Kelly's response spat back at him viciously. "I means thet what Bear Cat says are true es text. I mean thet 'stid of seekin' ter kill him, I'm a-goin' along with him. I've done been a slave ter Kinnard Towers long enough—an' right now I aims ter quit."

"Shell we tell Kinnard thet?" demanded Jim Towers dryly.

"Tell him any damn' thing ye likes. I'm through with him," and turning toward the astonished Stacy, he added, "I reckon we've done all we needs ter do hyar. We've busted thar bottles—an' thet's ter say we've busted thar hearts. Let's leave."

But Bear Cat's face was still grim and his words came with a clear-clipped sharpness. "Not yit. . . . They've still got some guns over thar. . . . I'll hold 'em where they're huddled, steady es a bird-dog. You git them guns."

George Kelly went circumspectly around the circumference of the fire and started back again, bearing an armful of rifles. At one point he had to pass so close to the dejectedly hulking

shoulders of a seated figure that his knee brushed the coat—and at that instant the man swept out his hand and jerked violently at the passing ankle.

Kelly did not go down, but he lunged stumblingly, and scattered weapons broke from his grasp. Even then he had the quickness of thought to throw them outward toward Bear Cat's feet and leaped side-wise himself, still clinging to one that had not fallen.

Taking advantage of the excitement Jim Towers sought to recover his feet—and almost succeeded. But with a readier agility Bear Cat leaped and his right hand, still gripping the pistol, swept outward in an arc. Under a blow that dropped him unconscious and bleeding from a face laid open as if by a shod hoof, Towers collapsed, scattering red embers as he fell.

Two others were on their feet now, but, facing Stacy's twin pistols and the rifle in the hands of their deserter, they gauged the chances and without a word stretched their hands high above their heads.

"Now we'll tek up a collection—of guns—once more," directed Stacy, "an' leave hyar."

As two men backed through the gorge into darkness, out of which only one had come, a murder party, disarmed and mortified, shambled to its respective feet and busied itself with a figure that lay insensible with its head among the scattered embers.

"George," said Turner a half hour later, "ye come ter me when I needed ye right bad—but hit's mighty unfortunate thet ye hed ter do hit jest thet way. Ye're ther only man I've got whose name is beknownst ter Kinnard Towers—an' next ter me, thar won't be a man in ther hills harder dogged. Ye hain't been married long—an' ye dastn't go home now."

George Kelly shook his head. "I'm in hit now up ter my neck—an' thar hain't no goin' back. Afore they hes ther chanst ter stop me though, I'm goin' by home ter see my woman, an' bid her fare over ter her folks in Virginny."

CHAPTER XXIII

BEAR CAT STACY had gone with George Kelly to the house where his wife was awaiting him that night, and though he had remained outside while the husband went in, it was not hard to guess something of what took place. The wife of only a few months came out a little later with eyes that were still wet with tears, and with what things she was going to take away with her, wrapped in a shawl. She stood by as George Kelly nailed slats across the door. Already she had put out the fire on the hearth, and about her ankles a lean cat stropped its arched back.

Bear Cat had averted his face, but he heard the spasmodic sob of her farewell and the strange unmanning rattle in the husband's throat.

It was a new house, of four-squared logs, recently raised by the kindly hands of neighbors, amid much merry-making and well-wishing and it had been their first home together.

Now it was no longer a place where they could live. For the man it would henceforth be a trap of death, and the wife could not remain there alone. It stood on ground bought from Kinnard Towers—and not yet paid for.

Kelly and his wife paused by the log foot-bridge which spanned the creek at their yard fence. In the gray cheerlessness, before dawn, the house with its stark chimney was only a patch of heavier shadow against ghostly darkness. They looked back on it, with wordless regret, and then a mile further on the path forked, and the woman clutched wildly at her husband's shoulders before she took one way and he the other.

"Be heedful of yoreself, George," was all she said, and the man answered with a miserable nod.

So Kelly became Turner's companion in hiding, denied

the comfort of a definite roof, and depending upon that power of concealment which could only exist in a forest-masked land, heaped into a gigantic clutter of cliffs and honey-combed with natural retreats.

But two days after his wife's departure, he was drawn to the place that had been his home by an impulse that outweighed danger, and looked down as furtively as some skulking fox from the tangled elevation at its back.

Then in the wintry woods he rose and clenched his hands and the muscles about his strong jaw-bones tightened like leather.

The chimney still stood and a few uprights licked into charred blackness by flame. His nostrils could taste the pungent reek of a recent fire upon whose débris rain had fallen. For the rest there was a pile of ashes, and that surprising sense of smallness which one receives from the skeleton of a burned house, seemingly at variance with the dignity of its inhabited size.

"Hit didn't take 'em long ter set hit," was his only comment, but afterward he slipped down and studied upon the frozen ground certain marks that had been made before it hardened. He found an empty kerosene can—and some characteristics, marking the tracks of feet, that seemed to have a meaning for him. So Kelly wrote down on the index of his memory two names for future reference.

It had occurred to Mark Tapper, the revenue agent, that the activities of Bear Cat Stacy constituted a great wastage, bringing no material profit to anyone. He himself was left in the disconcerting attitude of a professional who sees his efforts fail while an amateur collects trophies. Before long the fame of recent events would cease to be local. The talk would be borne on wayfaring tongues to the towns at the ends of the rails and some local newspaper correspondent, starving on space rates, would discover in it a bonanza. Here ready-made was the story of an outlaw waging a successful war

on outlawry. It afforded an intensity of drama which would require little embellishment.

If such a story went to press there would be news editors quick to dispatch staff correspondents to the scene and from somewhere on the fringes of things these scribes would spill out columns of saffron melodrama. All these matters worked through the thoughts of Mark Tapper as preliminary and incidental. His part in such publicity would be unpleasant. His superiors would ask questions, difficult to answer, as to why he, backed—in theory—with the power of the government had failed where this local prodigy had made the waysides bloom with copper.

Decidedly he must effect a secret coalition with Bear Cat Stacy. If he could make some such arrangement as he already had with Towers, it might work out to mutual satisfaction. It might be embarrassing for Bear Cat to raid his kinsmen. It was equally so for Tapper to raid Towers' favorites. But by exchanging information they could both obtain results as harmonious as the arrangement of Jack Spratt and his wife. It was all a very pretty scheme for double-and-triple-crossing —but the first difficulty was in seeing Bear Cat himself.

Finally Mark decided to mail a letter to his man. For all his hiding out it was quite likely that there was a secret line of communication open between his shifting sanctuary and his home. He wrote tactfully inviting Turner to meet him across the Virginia line where he would be safe from local enemies. He gave assurance that he had no intention of serving any kind of summons and that he would come to the meeting place unaccompanied. He held out the bait of using his influence toward a dismissal of the prosecution against Bear Cat's father. Then he waited.

In due time he received a reply in Bear Cat's own hand.

"Men that want to see me must come to me. I don't go to them," was the curt reply. "I warn you that it will be a waste of time, but if you will come to the door of the

schoolhouse at the forks of Skinflint and Little Slippery at nine o'clock Tuesday night there will be somebody to meet you, and bring you to me. If you are not alone or have spies following you, your trouble will be for naught. You won't see anybody. Bear Cat Stacy."

At the appointed time and in strict compliance with the designated conditions Mark Tapper stood at the indicated point.

At length a shadow, unrecognizable in the night, gradually detached itself from the surrounding shadows and a low voice commanded, "Come on."

Mark Tapper followed the guide whose up-turned collar and down-drawn hat would have shielded his features even had the darker cloak of the night not done so. After fifteen minutes spent in tortuous twisting through wire-like snarls of thorn, the voice said: "Stand quiet—an' wait."

Left alone, the revenuer realized that his guide had gone back to assure himself that no spies were following at a distance. Tapper knew this country reasonably well, but at the end of an hour he confessed himself lost. Finally he came out on a narrow plateau-like level and heard the roar of water far below him. He saw, too, what looked like a window cut in the solid night curtain itself. Then the shadow-shape halted. "Go on in thar," it directed, and with something more like trepidation than he cared to admit, Tapper groped forward, felt for the doorstep with his toe and rapped.

"Come in," said a steady voice, and again he obeyed.

He stood in an empty cabin and one which had obviously been long tenantless. A musty reek hung between the walls, but on the hearth blazed a hot fire. The wind sent great volumes of choking smoke eddying back into the room from the wide chimney and gusts buffeted in, too, through the seams of the rotting floor.

Bear Cat Stacy stood before the hearth alone and seemingly unarmed. He had thrown aside his coat and his arms

were folded across a chest still strongly arched. His eyes were boring into the visitor with a gimlet-like and disconcerting penetration.

"Wa'al," came his crisp interrogation, "what does ye want of me?"

"I wanted to talk things over with you, Stacy," began the revenuer, and the younger man cut him short with an incisive interruption.

"Don't call me Stacy. Call me Bear Cat. Folks round hyar gave me thet name in derision, but I aims ter make hit ther best knowed an' ther wust feared name in ther hills. I aims ter be knowed by hit henceforth."

"All right, Bear Cat. You and I are doing the same thing —from different angles." The visitor paused and drew closer to the fire. He talked with a difficult assumption of ease, pointing out that since Bear Cat had recognized and declared war on the curse of illicit distilling, he should feel a new sympathy for the man upon whom the government imposed a kindred duty. He had hoped that Bear Cat would make matters easier by joining in the talk, but as he went on, he became uncomfortably aware that the conversation was a monologue—and a strained one.

Stacy stood gazing at him with eyes that seemed to punch holes in his sham of attitude. When the revenuer paused silence lay upon the place until he himself broke it.

Finally Tapper reached a lame conclusion, but he had not yet dared to suggest the thing he had come to broach, the arrangement whereby the two of them were to divide territory, and swap betrayals of confidence.

"Air ye done talkin' now?" The question came with the restrained iciness of dammed-up anger.

"Well—I guess so. Until you answer what I've already said."

"Then I'll answer ye right speedily. I'm bustin' stills like a man blasts up rock thet bars a road: ter make way fer

highways an' schools. *You* raid stills like Kinnard Towers' men commit murder—fer hire. I reckon thar hain't no common ground thet we two kin stand on. Ye lives by treachery an' blood money. Yore saint air Judas Iscariot an' yore God air Gain. I hunts open, an'—though ye won't skeercely comprehend my meanin'—thar's a dream back of what I'm doin' —a big dream."

Mark Tapper flushed brick red, and rose.

"Bear Cat," he said slowly. "Your father lies in jail waiting trial. I can do a heap to help him—and a heap to hurt him. You'd better think twice before you turn me away with insults."

Turner's voice hardened and his eyes became menacing slits.

"Yes—he lays in jail because Kinnard Towers bartered with ye ter jail him, but I hain't a-goin' ter barter with ye ter free him. Ye talks of turnin' ye away with insult—but I tells ye now hit's all I kin do ter turn ye away without killin' ye."

Stacy was unarmed and Mark's own automatic pistol was in his coat pocket. He should have known better, but the discovery that somehow Bear Cat Stacy had learned his complicity in a murder plot blinded him with an insane fury of fear and the hand leaped, armed, from its pocket.

"Ef I war you," suggested Bear Cat, who had not moved the folded arms on his chest, "I wouldn't undertake no vi'lence—leastways tell I'd looked well about me. Hev a glance at that trap overhead—an' them two doors."

Already the officer, with deep chagrin, recognized his folly. The open trap of the loft bristled with rifle mouths. The two doors which had a moment before been closed were now open and showed other muzzles peeping through, but who the men behind the guns might be, there was no indication—and there had been no sound.

"I didn't need ter show them guns—jest fer you," said Bear Cat slowly. "A man don't hardly need ter call his folks

tergether ter fight a skunk—but I knowed thet ye'd go back ter Kinnard Towers, an' I'd jest as lief hev ye name hit ter him, thet ye didn't find me hyar all by myself." He paused and then the cold contempt of his manner gave way to a more explosive anger.

"I aims ter furnish ye with a lantern an' one of my men will start ye on yore road. . . . I wants ter see thet lantern goin' over ther hill-top plumb outen sight—an' I don't want ter see hit hesitate whilst hit goes. Ef hit does pause—or ef ye ever comes back ter me ergin with any proffer of partnership, so holp me God Almighty, I'll send yore scalp ter Washin'ton with my regards ter ther government." He pointed a peremptory finger to the front door. "Now, damn ye, begone an' go swiftly!"

Outside Tapper saw a lantern moving, but revealing no face. He knew that it was attached to a long pole and that one side was masked—the hill device of men who need light for their footsteps yet seek to avoid becoming conspicuous—and he followed its glimmer until a voice said, "I reckon ye kin go yore own route from hyar—yon way lies ther high road. Ye kin tek ther lantern with ye."

* * * *

Blossom who, until a few weeks ago, had been thought of as a lovely child, was now the "Widder Henderson" to all who spoke her name. The people she met accosted her with a lugubrious sympathy which was hard to bear, so that she hastened by with a furtive shyness and an anxiety to be left alone. Every day she made her pilgrimage to the graveyard to lay freshly cut evergreens on the grave there, and the rabbit that had its nest deep under the thorns sat on its haunches regarding her with a frank curiosity devoid of fear. He seemed to recognize a kinship of shy aloofness between them which need not set even his most timorous of hearts into a flutter.

Yet although she was the "Widder Henderson," who had

experienced the bitter fate of so many mountain wives, she was after all, in years and in experience, a child.

Until a little while ago—a very little while—she had sung with the birds and her spirits had sparkled with the sunshine that flashed back from woodland greenery. Life had seemed a simple thing with the rainbow promise of romance lying somewhere ahead. Then Turner had awakened her to a conception of adult love—a conception which might have satisfied all her dreams had not Jerry Henderson come to dazzle her and alter her standards of comparison. Henderson had, as even his critic at the club admitted, that "damned charm" that is seductively indefinable yet potent, and what had been "damned charm" to the clubman's sophistication was a marvelous and prodigal wonder to the mountain girl. He had wooed her passionately in the shadow of death. He had come back to her through the shadow of death, and left her to go, not only into its shadow, but its grimly mysterious reality. Now he was not only her hero but also her martyr.

Mountain children know little of Christmas, except that it is often a period of tragedy, since then men ride wildly with pistol and jug, and hilarity turns too often to homicide. But one Christmas legend the children do know: that on the night and at the hour of the Saviour's birth the cattle kneel in homage and the sere elder bushes, for a brief matter of miraculous minutes, break into a foam of bloom.

Blossom clung to that beautiful parable, even now finding comfort in its sentiment, as she stood among the untended graves.

"I wonder now," she speculated, nodding her head wistfully toward the inquisitive cotton-tail that sat wriggling its diminutive nose, "I wonder now ef it would be *wrong* to put some elder branches here Christmas eve so thet—that—if they does bloom—I mean *do* bloom—they'd be nigh him?"

"Howdy, Blossom," accosted a voice and the girl looked up startled. Lone Stacy's wife stood at the thicketed edge of

the burial-ground, gazing at her, with eyes less friendly than their former wont.

The girl-widow came slowly forward, trying to smile, but under that unblinking stare she felt unhappy, and the older woman went on with a candid bluntness.

"La! Ye've done broke turrible, hain't ye? An' ye used ter be ther purtiest gal hyarabouts, too."

"It's been—hard times fer me," Blossom answered faintly.

"Hit's done been right hard times fer all of us, I reckon," came the uncompromising rejoinder, "but thet hain't no proper cause ter ketch yore death of grave-yard damp," and with that admonition, Mrs. Stacy went on her way.

Blossom stood silently looking after her, wondering vaguely why that almost resentful note of hardness had rasped in her voice.

"I haven't done nothin'—anything, I mean," she murmured in distress. "Why did she look at me that way, I wonder." Then suddenly she understood. That was just it. She had not done anything. The old woman was alone; her husband in prison and her son hunted from hiding place to hiding place like some beast dogged to death, and she, the girl who had always been like a daughter in that house, had been too stunned by her own sorrow to take account of her neighbor's distress.

Mrs. Stacy had always expected that Blossom's children would be her grandchildren. Turner had been wounded in defense of Jerry Henderson. Into the girl's memory flashed a picture with a vivid completeness which had failed to impress her in its just proportions at the time of its reality. Then her eyes had been engrossed with one figure in the group to the exclusion of all others. Now in retrospect she could visualize the trio that had stumbled through the door of her house, when they brought Jerry Henderson in. She could see again the way Bear Cat had reeled and braced himself against the wall, and the stricken wretchedness of his face.

Slowly the tremendous self-effacement of his generosity began to dawn upon her, and to sting her with self-reproach.

So long as she lived she felt that her heart was dead to any love save that for the man in the grave, but to the old comradeship—to the gratitude for such a friendship as few women had ever had—she would no longer be recreant. No wonder that Turner's mother looked at her with tightly pressed lips and hostile eyes. She would go over there and do what she could to make amends and alleviate the loneliness of a house emptied of its men; a house over which hung the unlifting veil of terror, which saw in the approach of every passer-by a possible herald of tragedy.

* * * *

Uncle Israel Calvert sat alone by the small red-hot stove of his way-side store late in the afternoon. He was half dozing in his hickory-withed chair, and it was improbable that any customer would arouse him. A wild day of bellowing wind was spending itself in gusty puffs and the promise of blizzard, while a tarnished sun sank into lurid banks of cloud-threat.

Uncle Israel's pipe had gone out, though it still hung precariously between his clean-shaven jaws and his white poll fell drowsily forward from time to time. He listened between cat-naps to the voice of the storm and mumbled to himself. "I reckon nobody won't come in ter-night—leastways nobody thet hain't hurtin' powerful bad fer some plumb needcessity."

Then he fell again to dozing.

The rush of wind through a door suddenly opened, and closed, roused him, and seeing the figure of a man on the threshold, Uncle Israel came to his feet with a springy quickness of amazement.

"Bear Cat!" he exclaimed. "Hell's blazes, man, whar did ye drap from?" But at the same moment he went discreetly to the window and, since the shutters hinged from outside, hastily hung two empty jute sacks across the smeared panes.

"Uncle Israel," Bear Cat spoke with the brevity of one in haste, as he tossed a wet rubber poncho and black hat to the counter, "hev ye got any black cloth on them shelves?"

The storekeeper went ploddingly around the counter and began inspecting his wares, rubbing his chin as he peered through the dim lamp-light.

"Wa'al now," he pondered, "let's see. I've got jest what ye mout call a scant remainder of this hyar black domestic. I don't keep no great quantity because thar hain't no severe call fer hit—save fer them women-folks thet affects mournin'. Ther Widder Henderson bought most of what I had a few days back."

Bear Cat Stacy flinched a little, but the old man had his face to his shelves and did not see that.

"Ye'd better lay in a stock then," said Turner curtly. "Henceforth thar's liable ter be *more* demand."

Something in the tone made Uncle Israel turn sharply. "Does ye mean fer mournin'?" he demanded, and the reply was enigmatical.

"Mebby so—but fer another kind of mournin' then what ye hev in mind, I reckon. These hills has a plenty ter mourn about. I reckon ye'll heer tell of this black cloth again."

* * * *

It was a night when cabin doors were tight-barred and when families huddled indoors, drawing close to the fires that roasted their faces while their backs were cold from wind hissing through the chinks in wall and puncheon flooring.

Even the drag net of Kinnard Towers' search lay idle to-night in the icy grip of the storm.

Through the wildness of shrieking winds, lashing the tree-tops, some men said that they heard ghostly incantations like the chant of a great company of restless spirits.

Jim Towers, who had been knocked sprawling into his own bonfire before the eyes of his myrmidons, was feeling somewhat appeased in spirit to-night. He dwelt in a two-story

house so weatherproof that, for him, the tempest remained an external matter. To-night he had with him some half-dozen friends who had come for counsel earlier in the day and whom the storm had interned there for the night. They were all men who had been with him on the expedition that had gone awry when George Kelly had deserted. Now, as then, the company was defeating tedium with wassail. The drab woman who was Jim's wife, and his slave, had fed them all to repletion with "side-meat" and corn pone and gravy, and had withdrawn to a chair apart, where she sat forgotten.

They had been cursing Bear Cat Stacy and George Kelly until their invectives had been exhausted and the liquor had warmed them into a cheerier mood in which they planned spectacular and complete reprisal.

"Es fer Kelly, I reckon he's got his belly full an' bustin' already," boasted Jim Towers with an unpleasant chuckle. "Charlie Reverdy, hyar, an' me hes seen ter thet right fully. In ther place whar his dwellin'-house stood thar hain't nothin' left but jest a pile of ashes. He dastn't show his face in ther open—an' in due time Kinnard aims ter fo'close on ther ground hitself."

"George Kelly hain't ther only man thet's aidin' an' abettin' him, though," demurred a saturnine guest, whose hair grew down close to his eyebrows. "No man knows how many low-down sons of hussies he's got with him."

Jim Towers laughed and poured from jug to tin-cup. "A single fox kin hide out whar a pack of wolves would hev ter show themselves," he said. "I estimate thet he's got mebby a half dozen—an' afore long now we'll hev ther hides of ther outfit nailed up an' dryin' out."

At length the host arose and stretched his arms sleepily. "I reckon hit's mighty nigh time ter lay down," he suggested, and as yawning lips assented he added. "Be quiet a minute—I want ter listen. 'Pears like ther storm's done plumb spent hitself an' abated."

A silence fell upon them, and then as an uncanny and inexplicable sound came to their ears, they stood transfixed, and into their bewilderment crept an unconfessed hint of panic. Their eyes dilated as though they had been confronted by an apparition, and yet none of them was accounted timorous.

"Hell an' tormint, what *air* thet?" whispered Jim Towers in a hissing undertone.

They all fell into attitudes of concentrated attention—bent forward and listening. Out in the night where there had been only the lashing of wind, rose a swell of song, bursting confidently and ominously from human throats. It sounded like a mighty chorus carried on the lips of a marching host, and with its martial assurance it brought a terrifying menace.

"I've heered thet song afore," quavered the woman, whose lips were ashen as she rose out of her obscurity. "Hit's called ther Battle Hymn—my daddy l'arned hit in ther war over slavery . . . hit says su'thin 'bout 'My eyes hes seed ther Glory of ther comin' of ther Lord!'"

"Shet up, woman," commanded her husband, roughly. "I'm a-listenin'."

Towers braced himself against a nameless foreboding and went cautiously to the door, picking up his rifle on the way. The other men, instinctively drifted toward their weapons, too, though they felt it to be as futile a defense as arming against ghosts.

Soon the master of the house was back, with a face of greenish pallor. He licked his lips and stammered in his effort at speech.

"I kain't . . . in no fashion . . . make hit out—" he admitted. "Thar's a host of torches comin' hither. . . . They're flamin' like es ef hell hitself war a-marchin' in on us!"

The woman threw herself down on her knees and fell into hysterical and incoherent prayer.

For a little space the men stood irresolute, divided between a wild impulse to seek hiding in the timber and a sentiment

in favor of pinning their trust to the strength of solid walls and barred doors.

But upon their jarred nerves the great volume of sound, crashing nearer and nearer, beat like a gathering flood.

Turning out the lamp and half-smothering the fire, Jim Towers stole noiselessly to the back door and opened it to a narrow slit. He thrust forth his head and drew it back again as precipitately as though it had been struck by a fist.

"What did ye see?" came the whispered interrogation from stiff lips, and the man hoarsely gasped out his response.

"Thar was—a black ghost standin' thar—black as sin from head ter foot. He held a torch, an' each side of him stood another one jest like him—Good God! I reckon hit's jedgment day an' nothin' less!"

The woman had slipped out of sight, but now she came lurching back in wild terror.

"I peeked outen a winder," she whimpered. "Thar's score on' score of men—or sperrits out thar—all black as midnight. They've got torches flamin'—but they hain't got no faces—jest black skulls! Oh—Lord, fergive my sins!"

Then upon front and back doors simultaneously came a loud rapping, and the men inside fell into a rude circle, as quail hover at night with eyes out-turned against danger.

"I'm Bear Cat Stacy," came a voice of stentorian command. "Open the doors—and drop yore guns. We don't seek ter harm no women ner children."

Still there was dead silence inside, as eye turned to eye for counsel. Then against the panels they heard the solid blow of heavy timbers,

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEN the door fell in, Bear Cat Stacy stepped across the splintered woodwork, unarmed save for the holstered pistol in his belt. He made a clear target for at his back was the red and yellow glare of blazing flambeaux. Yet no finger pressed its trigger because the mad uselessness of resistance proclaimed itself. Like flood-water running through a broken dyke, a black and steady stream flowed around him into the house, lining the walls with a mourning border of unidentified human figures.

Their funereal like had never before been seen in the hills, and they seemed to come endlessly with an uncanny silence and precision.

They were not ghosts but men; men draped in rubber ponchos or slickers that fell, glinting with the sheen of melted snow, to their knees. Their black felt hats were pointed into cones and under the brims their eyes looked out through masks of black cloth that betrayed no feature. Except for Bear Cat Stacy himself and George Kelly, who were both unmasked, no man was recognized—and no voice sounded to distinguish its possessor.

The mauling of the battering ram on the rear door ceased and a pulseless quiet followed save for the tramp-tramp of feet as yet other spectral and monotonously similar figures slipped through the door and fell into enveloping ranks along the walls, and for the woman's half-smothered hysteria of fright.

Angered by her disconcerting sobs, Jim Towers seized his wife's shoulder and shook her brutally. "Damn ye, shet up afore I hurts ye," he snarled, and, as he finished, Bear Cat Stacy's open hand smote him across the lips and brought

a trickle of blood. Into the eyes of the trapped man came an evil glitter of ineffectual rage, and from an upper room rose the wail of awakened children.

"Go up sta'rs, ma'am, an' comfort ther youngsters," Turner quietly directed the woman. "No harm hain't a-goin' ter come ter you—ner them." Then, wheeling, he ripped out a command to the huddled prisoners.

"Drap them guns!"

When the surrendered arms had been gathered in, Stacy drew his captives into line and nodded to George Kelly, who stepped forward, his face working with a strong emotion. One could see that only the effect of acknowledged discipline stifled his longing to leap at the throat of Jim Towers.

"Kin ye identify any one man or more hyar, es them thet burned down yore dwellin' house? If ye kin, point him out."

Walking to a position from which he directly confronted Towers, Kelly raised a finger unsteady with rage and thrust it almost into the face itself. Then the hand grew steady and remained accusingly poised.

There was a moment of silence, tensely charged, which Bear Cat's voice broke with a steady precision of judicial inquiry.

"What proof hev ye got ter offer us?"

"Make him lift up his right foot an' show ther patch thet he's got on ther sole an' ther nails on ther heel," demanded Kelly eagerly, but at that Stacy shook his head.

"No. Fust ye tell us what manner of shoe hit war—then we'll see ef ye're right."

George Kelly described a print made by a shoe, home-mended with a triangular patch, and with a heel from whose circle of hobs, two were missing. "Now," snapped Bear Cat, "Let's see thet shoe. Tek hit off."

Reluctantly the man whose house had been invaded stooped and unlaced his brogan.

Stacy wheeled abruptly to face one of the lines against

the wall. "You men thet seen them foot-prints, atter thet fire, step ter ther fore."

A quartette of figures detached themselves and formed a squad facing the captives and when the shoe had been passed from hand to hand along their line Turner went forward with his inquisition. From no other throat came a syllable of sound.

"I wants every man thet's willin' ter take oath thet he recognizes thet sole—as ther same one thet made them prints —ter raise his right hand above his head. Ef he hain't p'intedly sure, let him keep his arms down, an' ef he misdoubts hit's ther same identical shoe, let him hold up his left hand."

In prompt unison four right hands came up, and, having testified, the mute witnesses fell back again to their places against the walls.

"Does ye *ree*cognize anybody else, thet war thar?" Kelly was questioned and without a falter of doubt he again thrust an index finger forward close to the blanching face of Charlie Reverdy.

Jim Towers stood bracing himself with a stiff-necked effort at defiance. He was caught by an overwhelming force of his enemies—and no help was at hand. No rescue was possible and he expected death, as in similar circumstances, he would have inflicted it. But the sneer which he forced to his lips could not out-testify the sickly green of his pallor as he awaited his sentence.

When the identification of Reverdy had been also corroborated by similar procedure, Bear Cat turned once more to confront Towers.

"Hev ye any denial ter make? Hev ye anything ter say?"

"All I've got ter say," was the insolent retort, "air thet ye kin go ter hell. Finish up yore murder . . . ye kain't affright me none."

"Burnin' down dwellin' houses air a grave matter," pursued Stacy with a grim calm. "Hangin' hain't none too severe

fer any man thet would foller hit. So we hyarby sentences ye ter death—but we suspends ther sentence. We don't aim ter hang ye—leastways not yit." After a pause freighted with deep anxiety for the accused he added, "All we aims ter do with ye air ter tie ye on bare-backed mules thet's right bony an' slavish ter ride, an' ter tek ye acrost ther line inter Virginny." The tone in which the edict was pronounced bore inexorable and sincere finality.

"But from thar on, both of ye air ter leave ther mountings an' never come back ter this community ergin. An' ef ye *does* undertake ter come back, we swears afore Almighty God ter kill ye both—an' onless ye both gives yore solemn oath ter faithfully obey this command—we'll kill ye now an' hyar."

There was no choice. Grudgingly the pair accepted exile, which after all was a more lenient punishment than they had expected or deserved. Towers was permitted to take leave of his family, but it is doubtful if the woman regarded that parting as an unmixed affliction.

Slowly the culprits were escorted out to see in the darkness of the forests other black shapes that wavered fantastically and dreadfully under the flare and sputter of pine torches. At the middle of a long column, twisting like a huge snake along deserted roads, they were escorted into banishment.

The other men in the house were held prisoners until dawn. Then each, blindfolded and in custody of a separate squad, was taken to a point distant from his home—and liberated.

The morning came with a crystal clarity and hills locked in a grip of ice, but the army whose marching song had startled sleeping cabins into wakefulness had dissolved as though its ghostly existence could not survive the light of day. Yet behind that appearance and disappearance had been left an impression so profound that the life of the community would never again be precisely what it had been before.

A new power had arisen, inexplicable and mysterious—but one that could no longer be ignored.

With bated breath, around their hearth fires, the timorous and ignorant gossiped of witchcraft, and sparking swains were already singing to the accompaniment of banjo and "dulcimore" ballads of home-made minstrelsy, celebrating the unparalleled achievements of the young avenger of wrong-doings and his summary punishment of miscreants. They sang of the man who:

"Riz outen ther night with black specters at his back,
Ter ther numbers of scores upon scores,
An' rid straightway ter ther dwellin' house of Bad Jim Towers,
Who treemored es they battered down ther doors."

More than one mountain girl bent forward listening with heightened pulses as the lad who had come "sweet-heartin'" her shrilled out his chorus.

"So his debt fer thet evil Jim Towers hed ter pay,
Fer they driv him outen old Kaintuck, afore ther break of day.
All sich es follers burnin' down a pore man's happy home,
Will hev ter reck ther Bear Cat's wrath an' no more free ter roam."

And perhaps as the lass listened, she wondered if her own home-spun cavalier might not be going straight from her door to one of those mysterious meetings where oath-bound men gathered in awful and spectral conclave.

Sometimes, too, it was not only a song but an actual sight as well, which made the flesh creep along the scalp. Sometimes out of the distances came, first low and faint, then swelling into fulness that chorus of male voices along the breeze, and after it came the sight of a long serpent of light crawling the highways.

Through doors opened only to slits wondering eyes peered out into the blackness while that mysterious procession passed,

seemingly an endless line of torches shining on black horsemen riding in single file.

When the singing ended and the night-riders went in silence they were even more awe-inspiring and ghost-like than before—and, except by remembering that the man of the house was absent, no woman could guess who any member of the train might be, for they passed with hat brims bent low and black masks coming down to their black slickers, and even their horses were swathed in flowing coverings of the same inky disguise. They were torch-lit silhouettes riding the night, but when they passed, those who saw them knew that some task was being accomplished in which the law had failed and that somewhere black dread would deservedly strike.

Kinnard Towers himself, racking his brain, took a less romantic view, but one of equal concern.

"Hit's done got beyond a hurtful pest now," he grumbled to Black Tom as the two of them sat over their pipes. "Ther longer he goes on unchecked ther more an' more fools will flock ter him. He's gittin' ther *people* behind him an' hit's a-spreadin' like hawg cholera amongst young shoats."

"Does ye 'low they're all Stacys—or air thar some of our own kin mixed in with 'em?" queried Tom anxiously, and because he, too, had been pondering that vexing question, the Towers leader shook his head moodily.

"Thar hain't no possible way of tellin'. They seems ter possess a means of smellin' a man thet hain't genu-*wine*ly fer 'em an' sich-like kain't git inter no meetin's ter find out nothin'."

He puffed out a cloud of smoke and sought to comfort himself with specious optimism. "I reckon folks is misled as ter numbers, though. A few folks ridin' in ther night-time with noise an' torches looks like a whole passel."

"They acts like a whole passel, too," supplemented Black Tom, who had a blunt and unrelieved fashion of speaking his mind. "What does ye aim ter do erbout hit all?"

The florid man brought his great fist down on the table and his bull-like neck swelled with anger.

"I aims ter keep right on twell I gits this damned young night-rider hisself. Ther minute he dies ther rest of hit'll fall in like a roof without no ridge-pole."

He paused, then went on musingly: "I wouldn't be amazed none if Fulkerson's gal knows whar he's at right frequent. I've done *devised* a means ter hev her lead somebody ter him some time when he's by hisself. Ratler Webb seed him walkin' alone in ther woods only yistiddy."

"Why didn't Ratler git him then?"

Kinnard ground his teeth. "Why don't none of 'em ever git him? He claims he hed a bad ca'tridge in his rifle-gun an' hit snapped on him. Folks calls him Bear Cat an' hit 'pears like he's got nine lives in common with other cats. We've got ter keep right on till we puts an end ter all of em."

Black Tom was so inconsiderate as to burst in a raucous laugh of ridicule. "Hit usen't ter be so damn' hard ter kill one man," was his unfeeling comment.

About that time Kinnard's man-pack developed a strong disinclination to take bold chances of falling in with the black army of torches. They moved about their tasks with such constraint that their quarry had a correspondingly greater freedom and latitude. And moonshiners no longer boasted defiance, but dug in and became infinitely secretive. In spite of all these precautions, however, day after day saw new trophies hanging along way-side branches until there were few left to hunt out.

One afternoon, walking alone through the woods, Bear Cat Stacy stooped at the edge of a "spring branch" to quench his thirst, and as he knelt he saw floating past him yellow and broken grains of corn. Cautiously and invisibly he followed the stream upward, worming himself along until he lay looking in upon the tiny plant of a typical illicit still. Its fire was burning under the mash kettle and back far enough

to escape the revealing light was a bark roofed, browse-thatched retreat in which sat an old man, reflectively smoking.

As Bear Cat looked on, a startled surprise came into his expression and his face worked spasmodically as if in pain. He wished he might not have seen the floating evidence which had brought him here and confronted him with the hardest tug-of-war between sincerity and blood-loyalty that he had yet encountered.

The man huddled there in his rabbit-warren retreat was old Turner Stacy, brother of Bear Cat's father and the uncle for whom he had himself been named. Bear Cat had not even suspected that this kinsman was operating such a plant. The elder Turner Stacy was a fierce and close-mouthed fellow whose affairs were confided to no one.

Bracing himself for an ordeal, Bear Cat emerged from his concealment and walked forward.

At sight of an unannounced visitor the old man's hand went quickly out toward the rifle lying at his side, but as he recognized the face, he rose without it and stood silently glowering.

"Uncle Turner," began the nephew seriously, "I hain't hardly willin' ter use fo'ce erginst ye—but ye knows what hit would sound like fer folks ter fling hit up erginst me thet I'm favorin' my own blood. I wants thet ye give me yore hand ter quit."

For a moment the aged face worked with passion, its white beard bristling and its eyes flaming.

"Who do ye think ye air—God Almighty?" came the angry question. "Who give ye license ter come brow-beatin' yore elders? Yore own paw's in jail now because somebody betrayed him. . . . I wonder war hit *you!*"

The young man recoiled as though an unexpected blow in the face had stunned him.

"My God," he exclaimed in a low voice, "I didn't never expect ter hear a kinsman charge me with sich infamy. I reckon I've got ter look over hit though. Ye're my father's

brother an' ye're right aged." He paused and then his voice changed to one crisp and peremptory.

"I reckon ye knows I've got ther power ter compel ye as I've compelled others. Does ye aim ter destroy thet thing yoreself,—now,— or does ye want thet I brings fo'ce?"

There ensued a half hour of storm, but at its end the older Stacy bowed to necessity. He, too, knew of the black army, and though he swore like a baffled pirate into his beard he capitulated. Bear Cat left a demolished place, carrying with him a fresh trophy, but he went with a heavy heart.

It would have surprised him had he known that, left alone, his uncle's wrath had turned suddenly to amusement for some private joke of his own.

As the old man watched the retreating figure he chuckled and mumbled to himself.

"Hit's right good fortune thet he came this week 'stid of next," he soliloquized as he refilled his pipe's bowl, still smiling. "I'm glad he didn't know I'd done ordered me a brand-new worm—an' thet hit's due ter get hyar right soon."

As he puffed at the home grown tobacco, the elder Turner Stacy added: "I reckon, though, I'd better pick out a fresh spot afore I sets ther new one up."

* * * *

Since Blossom had realized her neglect of Turner's mother that day in the grave yard she had sought to make amends by many small attentions and frequent visits.

One afternoon as she came into the house, she found Mrs. Stacy, who had been bed-ridden with a deep cold, dressing herself with weak and trembling hands. The girl's face became instantly stern.

"I told ye not ter rise from yore bed ter-day," she began and the other woman dropped into a chair in pure feebleness.

"I don't seem ter hev no stren'th lef' in me," she complained. "Seems like I've got a thousand bones inside me—an' all on 'em achin'."

"You must go back to bed, straightway. I'll brew ye somethin' hot an' kiver ye up, an' read ter ye twell ye goes ter sleep."

But Mrs. Stacy responded with a short laugh that rasped bitterly.

"Turney air a hidin' out ter-night in thet small cavern whar ye tuck Mr. Henderson oncet. I've done carried him victuals over thar twict since he's been livin' like a varmint in the woods. I war jest makin' ready ter sot out ergin. Ther riders hain't a-meetin' ter-night an' he's thar all by hisself."

"Whar's George Kelly?" demanded Blossom quickly, for she was to some degree initiated in the operating methods of Turner and his followers.

"He's done fared over inter Virginny ter visit his wife. She's ailin'."

"But I don't understand. What does Turner need?"

The mother trembled with a sudden access of the terror she had been fighting back. Her voice rose shrilly and broke: "He needs ter be fore-warned. His enemies hev diskivered whar he's at—an' they aims ter trap him thar ter-night."

The color went out of the girl's face as she questioned tensely. "How—how did ye hear tell of this?"

"A leetle while back I heered a shout outside, an I riz' up an' went ter ther door. Thar wasn't nobody in sight, but I found this hyar letter stuck thar with a pin. Whosoever hit war thet left hit, hed done went away." She held out a clenched, talon-like hand and opened it, and on a small sheet of ruled paper, printed out unevenly, Blossom read the anonymous message: "I can't be seen giving you this letter because I'm accounted to be Kinnard's man. They knows where Bear Cat is hiding to-night and are planning according. Git him warned straightway.—A Friend."

"Thet's all I knows," moaned the mother, "but thar hain't nobody with him—an' he don't suspicion nothin'."

The girl was already throwing her discarded shawl about her shoulders.

"You go right back ter bed. I reckon ye kin trust me ter warn him." Her eyes were full of warlike fire. "I kin go quicker then you, an' I won't pause till I've got thar an' told him."

"Ye'll fare right back again, won't ye?" quavered the sick woman. "An' fotch me tidin's—thet he got away safe."

Blossom had been a little stoop-shouldered of late with that carelessness of carriage that comes from grief, but now again she was lance-like in her straightness and vibrant with the determination of a Valkyr.

"I'll come back ter ye," she vowed and then she burst out: "I reckon this day I kin pay back some leetle part of ther debt I owes to Turney. God knows he's done enough fer me!"

She went over the steep path with the light fleetness of some wild thing—and of course she did not know that after her, unseen and silent as a shadow, followed a slouching figure, using her as a guide. She did not know either that, as she left the more traveled ways and turned abruptly into the thicketed forest, that figure was joined by two others, or that one of them, after a few whispered words, struck off to communicate with more distant members of the hidden pack.

A wild haste drove her for she knew that Turner trusted the secrecy of that cave, known, as he thought, only to his friends. Every moment she could gain for him would mean a distance put between him and his peril.

Several times she paused just long enough to look about and assure herself that she was not being followed—and then went forward again, falsely reassured by the silence and seeming emptiness of the wintry woods.

Pantingly she came to the mouth of the cave. Before it lay a small plateau, gashed across by a gulch that went down a sheer hundred feet and littered with piles of broken and gigantic rock. The opening to the grotto itself was tucked

back between these great bowlders, and for that reason had remained so nearly undiscovered. Just outside the fissure, she halted and gave the old signal of the owl's call. Thrice she repeated it, and then as she stood with her hands pressed to her heart, she saw a face appear, and a moment later Bear Cat had thrust himself lengthwise out of the bottle neck, and stood at her side, his face glowing with surprised delight for her coming.

"Blossom!" he cried. "What brought ye?" and in his voice throbbed the rebirth of wild hope for the miracle which, he had told himself, would never come back into his life.

But Blossom laid a sobering hand on his arm and talked rapidly.

"Thar's dire need of haste an' little time fer speech. Yore enemies know you're here an' ter-night they're comin' ter hem ye in—an slay ye. Fer God's sake go—swiftly!"

The man's face, which had softened into tenderness, stiffened. He gulped down his disappointment and said simply, "I'm obleeged ter ye, Blossom," then went into the black cranny. The girl could see the dim glow of his electric torch flashing there, but as she waited she heard something from the other direction which made her heart miss its beat; the sound of furtively guarded voices somewhere in the litter of bowlders. Instantly she, too, disappeared into the fissure.

"They're hyar a'ready," she panted. "I've done come too late. Thar hain't but ther one way out, neither, is thar?"

For an instant Turner Stacy stood immovable, listening as his thumb slid black the hammer of his rifle.

"Thar hain't but one way *you* kin go out," he told her —"ther same way ye come in."

His face was grim and hurriedly he went on: "But hyar of late I diskivered a leetle hole jest big enough ter crawl through—way back at ther end of a small gulch. Thar's a tree-top nigh by—but ye hes ter dive fer hit offen ther edge of ther clift—and trust God ter aid ye when ye seeks ter

ketch hold of a limb. I reckon mebby I mout go out thet way—ef I war by myself."

But Blossom's eyes had lighted with a sudden hope.

"Ye've got ter try hit, then, Turney," she declared staunchly. "Take yore pistol an' leave me yore rifle. I'll make 'em think ye're still hyar fer a spell anyhow."

"Does ye reckon I'd go away an' leave ye hyar ter them wolves?" questioned the man scornfully, and with palms against his chest, as if she would push him bodily back to the one chance of escape, she spoke urgently:

"In thet leetle hole thar, one gun kin hold back a whole mob an' ef ye gits away I reckon ye kin git some friends an' come back, kain't ye?"

"Ef I kin make Pinnacle Rock an' light a fire thar—I kin hev a score of men hyar in two hours' time—but two hours——" He broke off with a groan.

"Then do hit. I kin hold 'em back longer then thet. Ef they does git in, I'll pretend ye jest left by ther backway. They won't harm me nowhow."

He doubted that, but he knew that his staying meant ultimate death for both of them, and that once outside he had a chance to rally his forces for her rescue. For a little longer his reluctance to abandon her even temporarily held him in quandary, then realizing that it offered the only hope, he seized her fingers in a tight grasp and whispered:

"Farewell—then. God be with ye twell I gits back."

He worked his way along a twisting passage hitherto known only to spiders and bats until at length he could see a yellow shred of westering sky through a narrow rent in the blackness. As he edged his body through the rift he heard a rifle shot reverberating brokenly through the twisting tunnels, followed by a dogged spatter of response—or was it only echo? He ground his teeth and poised himself precariously on a foothold, inches wide, and treacherously insecure. He measured the distance to a hickory branch that the wind

rocked and between its support and himself was emptiness. The scaly bark of the limb for which he must leap was near the top of a tree whose roots were planted fifty feet lower.

Turner gathered his muscles into elastic readiness—and plunged outward. There was an instant of terrific uncertainty, then he swung pendulum-like, upon a support that sagged and gave under his weight as he hooked his knees about the branch and drank in a deep breath of thanksgiving.

Blossom, kneeling unseen and partly protected by a sandstone barricade, had been peering out at the broken gulches which were already filling with a dusky gray. She must keep those alley ways clear and there were two of them. A twilight depression gnawed at her heart.

Finally she saw a furtive and leering face thrust slowly and cautiously around the angle of stone. Her pulses pounded, but her rifle was trained, and her hands unshaking. For the first time since Henderson's murder, something like a thrill warmed her veins. Now she could hit back and avenge and take a man's chance of death in doing it. Then the man, bent on reconnaissance, ventured a forward step. He had not come quite far enough to see the opening itself though he knew that it must be hidden somewhere among those bowlders. He peered with lynx-like eagerness—ready to leap back if need be—and Blossom pressed her trigger. Without a groan the figure wilted down and lay in grotesque shapelessness between the rocks.

The fusillade which came in response was random and ineffective, and the girl, nerved to battle, found the long and anxious silence which ensued a purgatory of suspense. At the end she knew they would attempt to overwhelm defense in a charge and the passing minutes ate like decay into the tissue of her courage. Then what she dreaded came. They were making a rush through both alleys at once. If they succeeded in crossing the twenty feet of open danger, they could spread out on each side of the cave's mouth, themselves

safe by reason of the angle, and seal the place up like a tomb.

Yet the first assault broke into demoralized flight under her fierce welcome of fire and two other assailants fell wounded. Once more soundless minutes dragged by in interminable suspense—then as the second charge was launched, Blossom's rifle jammed its mechanism and became dead in her hands. She threw it down and ran toward the passage at the back. As it narrowed until she had to go on hands and knees, she heard voices inside the cave—and then for the first time her nerves snapped and she fainted.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN the curtain of unconsciousness rolled up again Blossom was no longer in the cave, but was lying on the ground between the rocks outside. It was dark now, but a lantern was lighted near at hand, and her wrists and ankles ached with the bite of knotted ropes.

Although she could see no one, she had the distinct sense of eyes gazing at her from somewhere beyond the narrow circle of light and as she stirred uneasily, she heard a voice that seemed to come from behind the sandstone at her right. "She's done come ter herself. Now we've need ter hasten." Then from her left a sugar-loaf bowlder appeared to question her.

"Whar did he go to? You knows an' we knows ye know—an' we don't aim ter be trifled with neither. Ef ye speaks out honest an' ready, we'll go an' git him fust an' then come back an' sot ye free atterwards."

Blossom writhed with a realization that she was in the hands of creatures as savagely merciless as wolves, but she set her teeth.

"I hain't never a-goin' ter tell ye," she declared staunchly, "not ef ye kills me!" A satirical laugh drifted from the shadows.

"All right, then, we've done made provision fer thet, too. Ef ye won't tell us whar he's at we'll find out fer ourselves, but we aims ter leave one man hyar with ye when we goes. He's done been drinkin' right-smart licker—an' he natch'rally won't want ye ter go away an' tell his name ter nobody."

The unseen speaker paused significantly, then added with a deliberate brutality: "I reckon ye'll have ter be mighty sweet ter thet man ef ye hopes ter go away from hyar alive."

The girl lay blanched but unyielding. She did not dare to hope that the threat was empty and her single chance lay in parrying for time. Bear Cat had said he would come back with reinforcements in two hours—if he won through—but he, too, was facing desperate odds and already they might have overwhelmed him: he might have failed in his dive from precipice to tree-top.

Her heart sank into a nausea of terror. No outrage was beyond these human jackals, but she was bred to iron courage and the warlike blood in her veins welled up in defiance.

"I've done already give ye my answer," she retorted, forgetting her ideals of diction. "I don't aim ter alter hit none—damn ye!"

"We aims ter be plumb fa'r an' reasonable," wheedled the voice of the spokesman with an evil sneer. "Deespite yore contrary muleishness, we're goin' ter tarry hyar jest precisely five minutes by ther watch ter afford ye a chanst ter study ther matter over, but don't make no mistake. We means, in sum an' substance, jest what we says . . . most anythin's liable ter happen ter ye when we goes away."

Blossom's pulses pounded so furiously that her sanity reeled through a thousand nightmare tortures before she heard the detestable voice once more drawling, "Wa'al, time's up. Ef ye fo'ces us now, hit's jest plain suicide—thet's all."

After that, for a while, she remembered nothing save the delusion that she was drowning—sinking down and still more deeply down through eternities. Her next definite impression came when she found herself inside the cave, with her head resting against the muddied knees of a man who sat cross-legged on the ground. At the mouth of the grotto was a lantern with its dimming shield turned outward so that, inside, its light fell in a grotesque effect of ragged formlessness.

As she stirred into returning consciousness, the creature who was cradling her aching head on his marrow-bones, took down the tin cup which just then obscured his face.

Blossom recognized Ratler Webb and the breath stopped in her tightened throat.

The degenerate face was unshaven and bristling. Its blood-shot eyes smirked at her with the brutalized leer of a satyr. The man bent over a little and with grimy fingers fondled the hair on her neck and temples.

"Jest tek yore time, sweetheart," he said. "Don't hasten ter rouse yoreself up. We've got ther night afore us."

As the girl flinched and struggled away from the beast-light of those predatory eyes, her captor only clasped her the closer so that his alcoholic breath came sickeningly close to her face. He chuckled thickly as he added, "I reckon I kin allow ye a leetle time—because we're beholden ter ye. We didn't hev no notion whar yore beau war a-hidin' at twell we left thet note over thar. Then ye led us straight ter ther place."

* * * *

Turner Stacy had clambered and slid precariously down the hickory tree without greater mishap than raw and bleeding hands. Once more on the ground, he ran like a madman, bending low in the timber.

The signal fire which he meant to build on the bald crest of Pinnacle Rock, would send out a flare visible to three states. Already he was twenty-five hundred feet above sea-level, but there remained a climb of almost a thousand more, and he was taking the direct and well-nigh perpendicular route.

Breathless, panting, vaulting from rock to rock; gripping, on faith, root and sapling, he climbed the steep stairway—where sometimes the earth shelved away underfoot—and he clutched wildly out for fresh support. Once there, with a fire blazing, he would have twenty or more of his nearest adherents riding to the rescue. They would rally on the highway just below the signal fire itself and there seek instructions—or signs. Fortunately for the present need, the night-riders had

developed a mysterious but thorough system of communication. Their code of signals embraced a series of crude emblems, which to the initiated designated the zone into which they were called for action.

With frenzied haste Bear Cat laid and lighted his fire on the bald summit—pausing only long enough to see its red glare leaping upward. Then he plunged downward again.

Along the highroad, which, for a little way, he followed boldly, he placed peeled twigs bent into circles at various conspicuous places, knowing that those who were to come would read from them the course to follow.

After that he disappeared into the thickets again and traveled swiftly. Twice, as he hurried, soft-footed, through the woods he halted and threw himself flat while members of the pursuing party well-nigh ran over him. But eventually he reached a litter of giant rocks that stood like undisciplined sentinels guarding the cave's entrance. Then he stopped and listened, and when he heard no sound he crept forward obsessed with apprehension. He could not escape the feeling that this seeming of calm was dangerously deceptive.

Finally as he lay flattened and listening with all his faculties razor-edged, he heard something that electrified him—a woman's scream.

Clawing out his pistol, he threw all caution to the winds and raced for the entrance of the cave, and as he went he heard it again, now sharp and terrified, and he recognized Blossom's voice.

In his haste it did not even occur to him to feel surprised that no rifles greeted him. An exaltation of wrath intoxicated him with superlative confidence. He could meet and overcome a host of enemies! His voice rose in Berserker frenzy. "I'm a-comin', Blossom! I'm a-comin'!"

* * * *

For perhaps three-quarters of an hour after Blossom had recovered consciousness the second time, it had pleased her

captor to sit across the narrow way from her, gloating with a bestial satisfaction over her helplessness, while he poured white stuff from bottle to tin cup.

Despite the advantages of his position, Ratler had thoughts which were disconcerting. At his hands lay the final opportunity to glut his long-starved hunger for revenge: to glut it fully and in a fashion of beastly brutality, and for that he had waited with a singleness of thought and purpose.

But behind him to-night he must leave no witness, and as he approached his task, he found that his nerves needed the steadying of strong drink—and yet more strong drink. Out of the flask he was not only drawing appeasement of thirst, but fuel for determination.

For a while he had even dozed while the girl, bound hand and foot, had shudderingly watched his dissolute and depraved face.

Then at the end he had risen, stretched his long arms and sauntered insolently over, looking down while he phrased repulsive compliments to her beauty.

Tiring eventually of his cat-and-mouse deliberateness, Ratler leaned down and, putting his arm about her waist, drew her up to him. Then it was that with all the revulsion that was in her she had screamed not once but until his hand had choked off her breath—and at that instant she had heard the shout from beyond the cave's entrance.

Webb heard it, too, and hurled the woman away from him, suddenly brought back to something nearer sobriety by the shock. He wheeled and trained his pistol on the entrance. He had laid aside his rifle and there was no time now to hunt for it. Bear Cat would have to stoop and edge his way into the place and in the process he could be easily dispatched.

But while he waited Ratler's knees shook and when, instead of crawling, he saw a shape dive almost horizontally through the aperture his courage evaporated. The lantern was badly placed and it confused the man inside because it

darkened the opening while it left him in plain sight. Ratler's revolver was spitting venomously but ineffectually. His hand was unsteady and his eye confused. The drunkard was reeling as he fought and after a dazed moment he felt himself caught in a bone-breaking embrace while the butt of a pistol hammered the consciousness out of his skull.

Turner Stacy was a wild man now. He stumbled blindly out of the cave dragging a limp figure behind him, and when he straightened up again and wiped his sweat-streaming face he had hurled the thing bodily outward, where the ravine dropped down a hundred feet.

He came back, palsied and shaken, and as he bent over the girl and cut away her bonds, his voice struggled through dry sobs.

"Blossom," he pleaded brokenly, "Blossom, tell me ye're only affrighted. Tell me thet ye didn't come ter no harm—fer my sake."

"I hain't hurt—Turney," she managed to whisper. "Ye came back—in time—jest barely in time."

She stood leaning weakly against the rock wall with her hands pressed tightly to her face.

The man stood, panting with excitement and exertion, but into his pupils came a sudden light of hope.

"Blossom," he whispered huskily, "Blossom—ye didn't . . . come over . . . hyar . . . because ye . . . because ye keered fer me, did ye?"

She took her hands away from her temples and looked at him with a white face, and in the unhappy honesty of her eyes the man read his answer. It was as if she had said, "My heart lies over there in *his* grave," and slowly, gravely Turner nodded his head. His face had gone gray, but through its misery it held a stamp of gentleness.

"I understands ye," he said simply. "I won't never pester ye no more." Then as some note of alarm came to his ears

he wheeled, all alertness again and his hand was once more gripping his pistol.

"I've only got three ca'tridges left," he said to himself. "Hit's nip an' tuck now which git hyar fust."

As he reached the mouth of the cave a shout came out of the darkness. "Ratler, air ye in thar?" and out into the night went the defiant response. "No, Ratler hain't hyar, but Bear Cat Stacy's hyar. Come on an' git me ef ye wants me."

There was a silence after that, which he knew meant a parley. As he knelt waiting he felt a hand on his shoulder and with eyes still searching the ominous darkness he spoke low, in a trained effort at self-control:

"Blossom, hit looks like we're trapped. Ye came inter this peril in an effort ter save me—an' I fears hit's goin' ter be hopeless. I hain't got but three ca'tridges left."

"Save one of 'em, Turney," she said without a tremor in her voice. "Shoot twice ef ye wants ter do hit—an' then give ther pistol ter me. I kain't bear ter fall inter their hands again."

Then as they counted the seconds they heard another sound. From across the nearer crests lusty voices, raised in unison, were chanting. Turner even fancied he could distinguish the familiar words, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." There was a clatter of gravel under dispersing footsteps and a low wake of frightened oaths—and the night had taken the attacking party to itself.

* * * *

The Stacys had pressing topics to discuss. The activities of their young kinsman were no longer a matter of theory but a condition, and their clan attitude toward him must be determined. Was he to be regarded as a renegade or as one still entitled to recognition?

At the house of Joe Stacy on a cold winter day a dozen of the elders gathered to discuss this matter.

"Bear Cat's done cast off all regards fer fam'ly loyalty," cried out a turbulent spirit whose eyes and voice bespoke fellowship with the jug. "He's makin' war on everything we've ever stood fer. Thet damned furriner bewitched him, I reckon. He's jest rampagin' round with a passel of wuthless Stacys and Towerses alike, destroyin' propitty. He's stirrin' up ther cast-offs an' woods-colts of both factions an' he hain't nuthin' more ner less then a damn' traitor."

But Joe Stacy, steadier of balance, thrust himself into the discussion.

"Thet hain't no fa'r ner rightful statement," he said slowly with the weight of thoughtful force. "Thar's some amongst us thet don't hold with Bear Cat an' some thet does—but he hain't no traitor. He told us out-spoken what he aimed ter do afore he commenced doin' hit, an' thet needed courage. Myself, I thinks he's a man with a vision, an' afore we casts him out I aims ter be heered."

There was a hum of discussion and while it was at its height, the elder Turner Stacy burst tempestuously into the midst of the gathering. The old man shook with rage and his voice quavered.

"By God," he roared, "thet boy's plumb crazed. He's got ter be handled—an' checked. I suffered him ter bust up my old still 'cause I knowed ther new one was a-comin', but now he's busted up ther new one, too. Hit war a beautiful piece of copper—an' right hard ter smuggle in."

The group of elders regarded the old blockader with varying emotions, as he stood glaring with an ember-like ferocity which he genuinely believed to be righteous indignation. But Joe Stacy, his own brother, permitted his shrewd eyes to twinkle as he laid a calming hand on the anger-palsied shoulder of the new arrival.

"Wa'al now, Turner," he suggested dryly, "by yore own showin' ye lied ter ther boy an' consented ter quit stillin'. Hit's right sensibly like these-hyar other outrages thet's done

been reported. He hain't nuver interfered with no man's *lawful* business yit—an' albeit I don't know who ther fellers air thet rides with him by night, I kin discarn right well by thar way they does things thet thar hain't no licker-befuddled folks amongst 'em." Suddenly the speaker's voice rose. "An', by God, I knows another thing besides thet! I knows thet some fellers roundabout, thet used ter be red-eyed an' sullen-visaged, kin look a man straight in ther face ter-day, clear-sighted an' high-headed. I've got a notion thet ye kin jest erbout identify these-hyar outlaws by ther way they carries thar chins high."

"What law air thar fer a man ter sot out compellin' other men ter adopt his notions, I wants ter know?" came the fierce demand, and Joe Stacy smiled.

"Thet's a fa'r question," he admitted, "an' I'll meet hit with an answer ther minit' ye tells me what law thar air fer blockadin'."

* * * *

One morning Bear Cat was coming along the road when he heard voices beyond the bend, and turned into the brush. Looking out, he saw such a strange procession that he emerged again.

A man whose back was stooped, and whose face wore a dull stamp of hopelessness, trudged along, carrying a bundle over his shoulder and a dilapidated carpet-bag in one hand. Behind him trailed three small children, the largest two also staggering under rough bundles.

"Whar be ye a-goin', Matthew Blakey?" hailed Stacy, and the man halted. He opened a mouth well-nigh toothless, though he was yet young, and replied in a tone of deep depression. "I'm farin' over ter thet new school, with fotched-on teachers in Fletcher County. I aims ter ask 'em ter take in these-hyar chil'len."

"Hain't ye goin' ter house 'em an' tend 'em no longer yore own self?" was the somewhat stern interrogation, and

the man's pale blue eyes filled suddenly with a suspicion of tears.

"Since thar mother died three y'ars back, I've done sewed an' washed all thar clothes my own self—an' gone out inter ther field an' wucked fer 'em," he said humbly. "I've done raised 'em es right es I knows, but I kain't do what I ought fer 'em. When I has ter leave 'em I kain't holp but study, s'pose ther house war ter ketch fire? They're all sleepy-headed leetle shavers."

"Why don't ye git married again?"

The voice shook a little. "Young 'uns oughtn't ter hev but just one mammy—an' I couldn't nuver be content with no other woman." He paused. "Hit's forty mile ter thet school, an' mebby they're full up—but I've done been over thar an' seed hit." The weary eyes lighted. "God knows I nuver 'lowed thet thar *war* sich fine places ter raise chil'len to'rds humanity an' l'arn 'em all manner of wisdom!"

"All right, go on over thar, Matthew," said Bear Cat in a matter-of-fact voice, but in his own pupils gleamed a soft light, "an' when ye come back jine with me. I'm seekin' ter bring hit erbout thet we kin hev a school like thet over hyar—whar yore children wouldn't be so far away."

The father stood twisting his broganed toe in the mud. "I heers thet ye don't tolerate licker, Bear Cat," he said sheepishly. "Hit hain't nuver made me mean ner nuthin' like thet—but since my woman died I've done tuck ter drinkin' hit—I misdoubts ef I could plumb stop."

Bear Cat Stacy smiled. "Termorrer drink half what ye've been usin' an' next day cut thet down a leetle. Anyhow come an' hev speech with me."

Matthew nodded and Turner watched the little procession trail out of sight behind the gray screen of the timber-line. "All sore-eyed, an' all sickly," he commented under his breath. "Not one of 'em gittin' a chanst ter grow straight! Mebby over thar, they will, though."

CHAPTER XXVI

"TAKE a cheer an' sit down, an' light a pipe—unless ye've got a cigar." The invitation came from the Honorable William Renshaw, circuit judge, seated in the same small chamber adjoining the court-room in Marlin Town, from which Kinnard Towers had issued orders on that afternoon of Big-meetin' time.

"Co'te don't meet till two o'clock—an' I'm always glad to have the chance to chat with distinguished counsel from down below—I don't get down thar oftentimes myself."

The man to whom Judge Renshaw spoke seemed conspicuously out of his own environment in this musty place of unwashed windows, cob-webbed walls and cracking plaster.

His dress bespoke the skill of a good tailor and his fingers were manicured. He drew out a cigar case and proffered a perfecto to his honor, then deliberately snipped the end from his own. Evidently he had something embarrassing to say.

"Judge," he began briefly, "I've been here now for upwards of a week, trying to get this business under way. You know what the results have been—or rather have not been. I've encountered total failure."

"Hasn't the prosecutin' attorney afforded you every facility, Mr. Sidney?" The inquiry was put in a tone of the utmost solicitude.

"That's not the difficulty," objected the visiting lawyer. "Mr. Hurlburt has shown me every courtesy—in precisely the way you have. Your instructions to the grand jurors were admirable. The prosecutor consented at once that I should participate in getting the evidence before them, and in assisting him to punish the guilty when indicted. It is now February. Jerry Henderson was murdered before the

first snow flew. Those subpoenas which we have sent out have for the most part come back—unserved. What witnesses we have secured might as well be mutes. The thing is inexplicable. Surely the judge can do something to energize the machinery of his court out of utter lethargy. I appeal to you, sir. We all know that Henderson was murdered . . . we all suspect who had it done, yet we make no progress."

Judge Renshaw nodded his head affirmatively.

"It looks right considerably that way." Then seeing the impatient expression on the other face, he spoke again—in a different voice, leaning forward. "Mr. Sidney, I reckon I know what's in your mind. You're thinkin' that both me and the prosecutin' attorney ain't much better than tools of Kinnard Towers. . . . Maybe there's a grain of truth in it. I'm judge of a district that takes in several county seats and I ride the circuit. Before I was elected to the bench I was a backwoods lawyer that sometimes knew the pinch of hunger. You say Kinnard Towers is dishonest—and worse. If I said it, I *might* hold office till the next election—but more likely I wouldn't live that long."

As the notable attorney from the city sought to disarm his smile of its satirical barb, the other proceeded: "That strikes you as a thing that's exaggerated—and a thing that a man ought to be ashamed to admit even if it was true. All right. Do you know that when you took the Henderson matter to the grand jury, nine men on the panel sought to be excused from service in fear of their lives? Do you know that on every day they did serve all twelve got anonymous letters threatenin' them with death? They know it anyhow—and you see they haven't brought in any true bills an' I predict that no matter what evidence you put before them—they won't."

"Why were those letters not presented to the Court? You have power to protect your panels with every company of militia in the state if need be."

"So I told 'em." The reply was laconic, and it was supplemented in a slow drawl. "But you see they've known militia protection before—and that guarantee didn't satisfy them. They figure that the soldiers go away after awhile—but there's other forces that stay on all the time—and those other forces can wait months or years without forgetting or forgiving."

"And this terrorization paralyzes your courts of justice?"

"Well, no. It lets 'em run along in a fashion—as you've seen."

Mr. Sidney strove to repress his choler, but his manner was icy as he remarked: "That's a strange utterance for a judge on the bench."

"Is it?" Renshaw's quiet eyes showed just a glint of repressed anger. "Doesn't it work the same way in your district—or materially the same? Are your judges free from the coercion of strong interests? Are your jurors all willing to die for their duty?" After a brief silence he added: "Why, Mr. Sidney, you came here yourself ostensibly in the interest of friends and relatives who were unwilling to let this murder go 'unwhipped of justice'—them were your words. Yet we all know that you're the chief lawyer for a railroad that hasn't ever been famed for altruism."

The visitor flushed.

"While you were working up this evidence," inquired his honor, "did you go out and try to talk to Bear Cat Stacy?"

"Certainly not. He's an outlaw—whom your deputies failed to bring in when I had a subpoena issued. My life wouldn't be worth tuppence if I tried to get to him."

Judge Renshaw smiled somewhat grimly.

"Yes, they call him an outlaw—but he swings a power right now that this high court doesn't pretend to have. He's the one man that Kinnard fears—and maybe he'd help you if the two of you could get together."

"A lawyer should not have to be his own process-server," was the retort of offended dignity.

"No—neither ought a judge." Renshaw took the cigar from his mouth and studied it. Then he spoke slowly:

"Mr. Sidney, there's nothing further I can do, but—put it on whatever ground you like—I'll make a suggestion. I'm beginning to doubt if Kinnard Towers is going to remain supreme here much longer. I think his power is on the wane. If you will make a motion to swear me off the bench for the duration of these proceedin's—and can persuade the governor to send a special judge and prosecutor here—I'll gladly vacate. Then you can bring your soldier boys and see what that will effect. That's the best satisfaction I can give you—but if I were you, since you have no patience with men that consider personal risks—I'd talk with this Stacy first. Of course, Kinnard Towers won't like that."

Mr. Sidney rose, piqued at the suggestion of timidity, into a sudden announcement. "Very well," he said, "I'll ride over there to Little Slippery tonight—to hell with this bugaboo Towers!"

"If I lived as far away as you do," suggested the judge, "I might allow myself to say, Amen to that sentiment."

Mr. Sidney did not, in point of fact, go that night, but he did a few days later. Had he known it, he was safe enough. Kinnard Towers had no wish just then to hurl a challenge into the teeth of the whole state by harming a distinguished member of the metropolitan bar, but before George Sidney started out, the Quarterhouse leader had knowledge of his mission, and surmised that he would be sheltered at the house of Joel Fulkerson.

When the lawyer arrived the old preacher was standing by the gate of his yard with a letter in his hand, that had arrived a little while before. It was from an anonymous writer and its message was this: "If you aid the lawyer from

Louisville, in any fashion whatsoever, or take him into your house, it will cost you your life."

Brother Fulkerson had been wondering whether to confide to any one the receipt of that threat. Heretofore factional bitterness had always passed him by. Now he decided to dismiss the matter without alarming his friends with its mention.

As he strode forward to welcome the stranger, he absently tore the crumpled sheet of paper to bits and consigned it to the winds.

"I am George Sidney," announced the man who was sliding from his saddle, stiff-limbed from a long ride. "I'm trying to effect the punishment of your son-in-law's murder, and I've come to your house."

"Ye're welcome," said the evangelist simply, and there was no riffle of visible misgiving in his eyes. "Come right in an' set ye a cheer."

Two days later Mr. Sidney rode away again, but in an altered frame of mind. He had met Bear Cat Stacy and was disposed to talk less slightingly of outlaws. He had even seen a thing that had made the flesh creep on his scalp and given to his pulses such a wild thrill as they had not known since boyhood. He had watched a long line of black horsemen, masked and riding single-file with flambeaux along a narrow road between encompassing shadows. He had heard the next day of a "blind tiger" raided, and of an undesirable citizen who had been sentenced to exile—though related by blood ties to the leader of the vigilance committee.

It was sitting in the lounging-room of his Louisville Club a week later that he unfolded his morning paper and read the following item—and the paper dropped from his hand which had become suddenly nerveless.

"Joel Fulkerson," he read, after the first shock of the head-lines, "a mountain evangelist, whose work had brought him into prominence even beyond the hills of Marlin County,

was shot to death yesterday while riding on a mission of mercy through a thickly wooded territory. Since, even in the bitterest feud days, Fulkerson was regarded as the friend of all men and all factions, it is presumed that the unknown assassin mistook him for some one other than himself."

George Sidney took an early train to Frankfort, and that same day sat in conference with the governor.

"It's a strange story," said the chief executive at length, "and the remedy you suggest is even stranger—but this far I will go. If you swear Renshaw off the bench, I will name a temporary judge and set a special term of court, to convene at once. The rest comes later, and we will take it up as we reach it."

* * * *

Once more, just after that, Bear Cat Stacy stood again with Blossom by a new-made grave, but this time he came openly. Those kinsmen who saw him there were of one mind, and had he spoken the word, they would have followed him through blood to vengeance. But Stacy, with the hardest effort of his life, held them in check. It would mar the peaceful sleep of that gentle soul whom they were laying to rest, he thought, to punish bloody violence with other bloody violence—and in his mind a more effective plan was incubating.

All that he would tell the grim men who met in conclave that night, ready to don their masks and fare forth, was that this was, above all others, an occasion for biding their time. "But I pledges ye faithful," he declared in a voice that shook with solemn feeling, "ye won't hev need ter grow wearied with waitin'. . . ."

No Towers watchmen came in these days to Turner's house. They contented themselves with keeping a vindictive vigil along the creeks and tributaries where they were numerically stronger. Each day Turner came to watch over Blossom with the quiet fidelity of a great dog. There was little enough that he could do, but he came and looked at her with hungry

eyes out of a hungry heart, speaking no word of his own love, but listening as she talked of her father. He sought in a hundred small ways to divert her thoughts from the grim thing that had twice scarred her life and taken the light out of her eyes. As he trudged back to his house, where he had again taken up his residence, after these visits, he walked with a set jaw and registered oaths of reprisal to take a form new to the hills.

As the days passed it was reported that on the motion of the commonwealth, alleging bias and prejudice, Judge Renshaw had vacated the bench, and that the governor had named a pro-tem. successor from another district—and called a special term of court, to sit at Marlin Town.

Kinnard Towers heard that news with a smile of derision. "Let 'em bring on thar jedges an' soldiers," he said complacently. "Ther law still fo'ces 'em ter put native names in ther jury wheel an' I reckon no grand jury thet dwells hyarabouts won't hardly indict me ner no petty jury convict me."

So it was something of a shock to his confidence when he heard that he, Black Tom Carmichael and Sam Carlyle had been indicted for conspiracy to commit murder. Even that he regarded as merely an annoyance, for as one of the grand jurors had hastened to assure him: "Hit war jest a sort of a formality, Kinnard. We knowed ther little jury would cl'ar you-all an' hit looked more legal-like ter let hit come up fer trial."

But the bringing of those indictments was really a tribute to the dawning power of Kinnard's enemies. The thing was intended as a compromise by which the grand jury should satisfy the Stacys and the petit jury should mollify Towers by acquitting him later.

Kinnard knew that Sam Carlyle had gone to Oklahoma, and that without him any prosecution must fail—but he did not know that the prosecution had already located him there and taken steps to extradite him.

Then one day, Bear Cat received a summons by mail to meet George Sidney in Frankfort, and since secrecy was the essence of the plan they had already discussed in embryo, he went in a roundabout way through Virginia and came back into Kentucky at Hagen. He was absent for a week and toward its end he found himself, under the escort of the Louisville lawyer, standing in the private office of the chief executive himself. Turner had never seen a city before. He had never met a man of such consequence, but the governor himself brought to the interview a dignity no more unabashed.

"This is the young man of whom I spoke, governor," said Sidney. "He has given his community the nearest approach it has known to placing sobriety and humanity above lawlessness. There are two men down there who run things. Towers owns the courts and—maintains feudalism. This young man heads an organization of night-riders—and challenges Towers. It's the young against the old: the modern spirit against the ancient habit."

The governor subjected Bear Cat Stacy to an inquisitorial scrutiny—which was met with a glance as undeviating.

"I am told that it has been impossible in your country," he began, "to enforce the attendance of witnesses and even of defendants at court. I am also told that you believe you can alter this."

Turner nodded gravely. "I kin fotch 'em in—dead or alive," he said with bold directness. "All I needs air ter be told who ter git."

"Dead witnesses," remarked the chief executive, "are very little use to any tribunal. If these men are your avowed enemies and in your power, why have you held your hand?"

Bear Cat flushed and though he spoke quietly there was the bell-like ring of ardor in his voice. "My power hain't ther law," he said. "I aims fer sich betterment as kain't come save by law: a betterment that kin last when I'm dead an' gone."

"This is the case, governor," interposed the lawyer. "The courts there are a bitter jest. Kinnard Towers operates a stronghold which is a pest-spot and breeding-nest of crime and debauchery. There is one agency only that can drag him out of it. That agency this man represents—and heads."

"Then if you are sent out, during this session of court," inquired the executive, "you agree to bring in whatever men are called to attendance?"

"Dead or alive—yes," reiterated Stacy with inflexible persistency.

"Unfortunately," smiled the great man, "the legislature, in its wisdom, has vested in me no power to instruct any citizen to deprive other citizens, however undesirable, of their lives. Whoever undertakes such an enterprise must do so on his own responsibility—and, despite the worthiness of his motive, he faces a strong chance of the death penalty."

There was a brief pause, as the lawyer and his protegé rose to depart, and the governor shook Bear Cat's hand. "You are a picturesque person, Mr. Stacy. I hope to hear more of you." Then as a quizzical twinkle wrinkled the corner of his eyes he added: "I almost think it is a pity that I have no power to authorize your wading in free-handed—but it's not within my official scope."

Bear Cat was standing straight and looking with searching gravity into the face of the governor. There seemed an odd variance between the words and the spirit back of the words, and then he saw the tall man with the distinguished face engage his glance with something intangibly subtle—and he saw one dignified eye deliberately close leaving its mate open. The governor of the commonwealth had winked at him—and he understood the perplexing variance between words and spirit.

Outside, in a corridor of the state building, Bear Cat laid a hand on Sidney's arm.

"When ther time comes," he said shortly, "I'll be ready.

I wants thet ye should hev hit give out in Marlin Town, thet ye sought ter persuade me, but that I wouldn't hev nuthin' more ter do with aidin' state co'tes then I would with revenuers." And that was the message that percolated through the hills.

When Turner returned home he went first to Blossom's cabin, his heart full of thoughts of her and sympathy for her loneliness. Old days there swarmed into memory, and just to see her, even now that he counted for so little, meant a great deal to him. But in the road, at first sight of the house, he halted in astonishment—for the chimney was smokeless—and when he hurried forward his dismay grew into something like panic as he found the windows blankly shuttered and the door nailed up.

Hastening to his own house, he demanded in a strained voice of fright. "Whar air she, maw? Whar's Blossom at?"

The old woman rose and took from the mantel-shelf a folded sheet of paper which she handed him without a word of explanation, and with shaking fingers he opened and read it.

"Dear Turney," she said, and her round chirography had run wild as weeds with the disturbed mood of that composition, "I can't bear it here any longer. I'm going away—for always. Jerry left a little money and the lawyers have paid it to me. It's not much, but it's enough. These mountains are beautiful—but they are full of misery—and memories that haunt me day and night. You have been more than good to me and I'll always pray for you. I don't know yet where I'll go. With love, Blossom."

Turner sagged into a chair by the hearth-stone and the paper dropped from his inert fingers. His face became very drawn and he silently licked lips which burned with a dry feverishness.

* * * *

The special session of court convened in Marlin Town with a quiet that lacked any tang of genuine interest. These

fiascos had come before and passed without result. Since Bear Cat Stacy had permitted it to be understood that he would hold aloof, no strength would challenge the sway of Kinnard Towers, save a "fotched on" judge and a few white-faced lawyers who wore stiff collars. They had not even brought tin soldiers this time nor dignified the occasion with a Gatling gun.

Towers himself remained comfortably at the Quarter-house, and if he had about him a small army of men its protection of rifle-muzzles pointed toward Little Slippery rather than Marlin Town. A posse would come, of course, since even his own courts must follow the forms and pretenses of the statutes made and provided, but their coming, too, would be a formality.

Outside a late winter storm had turned into a blizzard and though he did not often spend his evenings at the bar, Kinnard was to-night leaning with his elbow on its high counter. His blond face was suave and his manner full of friendliness, because men who were anxious to display their solicitude were coming in to denounce the farce of the trial inagurated by "furriners" and to proclaim their sympathy. It was all incense to his undiminished dominance, thought Towers, and it pleased him to meet such amenities with graciousness.

"Any time now—any time at all," he laughed, "them turrible deputy sheriffs air liable ter come bustin' through thet door, and drag me off ter ther jail-house." As he uttered this pleasantry, the assembled cohorts shouted their laughter. It was as diverting as to hear a battle-scarred tom-cat express panic over a mouse. "Howsoever, I hain't a shettin' no doors. They all stands open," added Kinnard.

Then, even as he spoke, the telephone jangled. It was a neighborhood wire which connected only a few houses in a narrow radius, but the voice that sounded through the receiver was excited. The proprietor of the lawless strong-

hold listened and made some unruffled reply, then turned to his audience a smiling face on which was written amusement.

"Well, boys," he genially inquired, "what did I tell ye? Thar's a scant handful of deputy sheriffs a-ridin' over hyar right now. They're within a measured mile of this place at ther present minute."

A low hum of voices rose in apprehensive notes, but Kinnard lifted his hand.

"You men needn't feel no oneasiness, I don't reckon," he assured them. "They hain't got nothin' erginst ther balance of ye. Hit's jest me they aims ter drag off ter ther calaboose—an' es I said afore, I'm leavin' my doors wide open."

As an indication of his confidence he ordered his bartender to fill all glasses, and beamed benignly on the recipients of his hospitality, while he awaited the minions of the law.

"They hed ought ter be hyar by now, them turrible fellers," he suggested at length, and as if in answer to his speech a sound of heavy steps sounded just outside the door.

A small posse stamped into the room, and the excellent jest of the entire situation became more pointed as men noted with what a shamefaced bearing they presented themselves.

"Kinnard," began the chief-deputy in an embarrassment which almost choked him, "I've got ter put ye under arrest. You an' Tom Carmichael thar, both. Ye're charged with murder."

The crowd wanted to laugh again, but because of their curiosity they desisted. Towers himself stepped back two paces.

"Gentlemen," he said blandly, "ye'll hev ter git papers fust from ther governor of Virginny." He swept his hand toward the white line on the floor. "Ye hain't hardly got no license ter foller me outen old Kaintuck. Thar's ther leetle matter of a state line lyin' atween us."

They had all known that Towers would handle the situa-

tion with a triumph of resource, and a subdued murmur of applause and adulation rose from many bewhiskered lips, as the posse withdrew slowly to the threshold over which it had entered.

Then they became deadly quiet, for a voice had spoken from the Virginia door. "Hold on!"

They wheeled and saw a single figure there, unarmed, and hands began going to holsters.

"Virginny and Kaintuck looks right-smart alike ter me," said Bear Cat Stacy with the level voice of one who has long waited his moment and finds it at hand. "Will ye all lay down yore arms, and surrender ther men we wants—or will ye stand siege an' have this pest-house burnt down over yore heads? I'll wait outside for an answer."

The amazement of the moment had held them gripped in tableau as he spoke, but when he stepped swiftly back, a dozen pistols spat and barked at him, and then, louder than the firing, they heard a circle of song—compassing the stockaded building on all sides—a giant chorus that swelled in the frosty air: "Mine Eyes have seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord."

Kinnard Towers' self-assurance fell away from him. His hand was unsteady as he raised it and said huskily: "Boys, we needs must fight."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE volume of the singing out there and the flare of the ruddy torches, left no doubt as to the substantial strength of the force which had swept aside such legal technicalities as state jurisdiction.

When Bear Cat had trusted himself so recklessly on the threshold while the opposite door still stood open, the spectral figures with masked faces could have streamed in, wave on wave, to smother out any up-flaming spirit of resistance, but in doing that there would have been hand-to-hand conflict, in which the innocent must pay as heavy and ultimate a penalty as the guilty.

So Turner had withdrawn, and permitted the barring of the doors—though he knew that the structure had the solid strength of square-sawed oak and that the besieged scores were fully armed. Now from the outside he hammered on the massive panels with a rifle butt.

"Ef ye wants ter send a man out hyar ter parley with me," he shouted through the heavy barrier, "I gives ye my pledge that he kin go back safe. Ef ye don't see fit ter do thet, we've got ter believe thet ye're all one stripe, resistin' arrest, and we aims ter set this hell-house ter ther torch."

"Let me have five minutes ter study erbout hit," Towers gave answer, then he turned to the men inside. "Go upsta'rs, Tom," he directed swiftly, "an' look out. Let me know how many thar seems ter be of 'em."

Carmichael, peering out of dark windows above, saw against the snow, innumerable sable figures bulking formidably in the red flare of blazing pine fagots. Other torches burned with a menacing assurance of power beyond them

along the road, and far up the distant slopes glittered reinforcements of scattered tongues of flame.

The figures nearest at hand stood steady with an ominous and spectral stillness, and their ghostliness was enhanced by the fitful torch-light in which the whole picture leaped and subsided with a phantom uncertainty of line and mass.

Black Tom came back and shook his head. "Hit hain't no manner of use," he announced. "We mout es well give up. I reckon we kin still come cl'ar in co'te."

But the old lion, whose jaws and fangs had always proved strong enough to crush, was of no mind to be caged now.

"Come cl'ar! Hell's blazes!" he roared with a livid face. "Don't ye see what's done come ter pass? He'll take these damn' outlaws over thar an' no jury won't dast ter cl'ar us. If we quits now we're done."

Towers leaped, with an astonishing agility to the counter of the bar and raised his clenched fists high above his head.

"Men!" he thundered, "hearken ter me! Don't make no mistake in thinkin' thet ef ye goes out thar, ye'll hev any mercy showed ye. This is ther finish fight betwixt all ther customs of yore blood—an' this damn' outlaw's new-fangled tyranny! He don't aim jest ter jail me an' Tom—he aims ter wipe out every mother's son thet's ever been a friend ter me.

"We've got solid walls around us now—but any man thet goes out thar, goes straight ter murder. Es fer me I don't aim ter be took alive—air ye of ther same mind? Will ye fight?"

His flaming utterance found credence in their befuddled minds. They could not conceive of merciful treatment from the man they had hounded and sought for months to murder from ambush. Inside at least they could die fighting, and nods of grim assent gave their answer.

"Ther stockade hain't no good now," Towers reminded them. "They're already inside hit, but from them upsta'r winders we kin still rake 'em severe an' plentiful whilst they're

waitin' fer our answer. Let them winders be filled with men, but don't let no man shoot till he heers my pistol—then all tergether—an' give 'em unshirted hell."

So, answering the reprieve with deceit, the block house, which had, for a generation, been an infamous seat of power, remained silent until a pistol snapped out and then from every window leaped spiteful jets of powder lightning and the solid roar of a united volley. That was the answer and as a light clatter of sliding breech bolts followed the crescendo, its defenders went on shooting, more raggedly now, as fast as each man could work his repeater. A chorused bellow of defiance was hurled outward as they fired.

Yet from out there came no response of musketry and, after all, the deceitful effort to convert the period of parley into a paralyzing blow had failed. Few flambeaux had been blazing in the space between the stockade and the house itself, and the ponderous eight-foot wall of logs built to make the place a fortress had become a protection for the besiegers so that only a few scattered figures fell. Then, with amazing unanimity of action, the torches were thrust down and quenched in the snow.

But Bear Cat Stacy himself had remained flattened against the door, too close to be seen from any window, and at his feet was a can of kerosene.

The glow from a match-end became first a slender filament of flame which widened to a greedy blanket as it lapped at the oil and spread crackling up the woodwork of the door's frame. Then, gathering a swift and mighty force, it laid a frenzied and roaring mantle of destruction upon the integrity of the walls themselves.

From inside came a chorused howl of bitter wrath and despair, and as Bear Cat turned and ran for it, crossing the space between door and stockade, he went through a hail of lead—and went with the old charm still holding him safe.

The Quarterhouse was strong enough to laugh at rifles,

but to flame it was tinder-like food. The roar and crackle of its glutting soon drowned the howls of its imprisoned victims. Maddened with the thought that, having refused parley, their lives were forfeit unless they could cut their way out, they raved like dying maniacs. The glare reddened and inflamed the skies and sent out a rain of soaring sparks that was seen from many miles away.

The Virginia door was obliterated in a blanket of flame, but abruptly the Kentucky door vomited a stream of desperate men, running and shooting as they came. Then, for the first time, the cordon of rifles that held them in its grip gave voice.

Between the house-door and the stockade, figures fell, grotesque in the glare, and those that did not fall wheeled and rushed back within the blazing walls. But in there was an unendurable furnace. They shouted and raved, choking with the suffocation of foul smoke waves like the demoralized shapes of madmen in some lurid inferno.

Then standing at the one door which still afforded a chance of exit, Kinnard Towers for the last time raised his arms.

"Throw down yore guns, men, an' go out with yore hands up," he yelled, seeking to be heard above the din of conflagration. "Myself, I aims ter stay hyar!"

A few caught the words and plunged precipitately out, unarmed, with hands high in surrender; and others, seeing that they did not fall, followed with a sheep-like imitation—but some, already struggling with the asphyxiation that clawed at their throats, writhed uneasily on the floor—and then lay motionless.

Kinnard Towers, with a bitter despair in his eyes, and yet with the leonine glare of defiance unquenched, stood watching that final retreat. He saw that at the stockade gate, they were being passed out and put under guard. It was in his own mind, when he had been left quite alone to walk deliberately out, fighting until he fell.

About him the skies were red and angry. His death would

come with a full and pyrotechnic illumination, seen of all men, and it would at least be said of him that he had never yielded.

So picking up a rifle from the floor, he deliberately examined its magazine and efficiency. After that he stepped out, paused on the doorstep, and fired defiantly at the open gate of the stockade.

There was a spatter of bullets against the walls at his back, but he stood uninjured and defiantly laughing. Without haste he walked forward. Then a tall figure, with masked face came running toward him and he leveled the rifle at its breast. But he was close to the gate now, and the man plunged in, in time to strike his barrel up and bear him to the ground.

Outside the stockade stood, herded, the prisoners, and at their front, the posse of deputies brooded over Kinnard Towers and Tom Carmichael, both shamefully hand-cuffed.

Bear Cat Stacy looked over his captives who, taking their cue from Towers himself, remained doggedly silent.

"You men," he said crisply, "all save these two kin go home now—but when ther co'te needs ye ye've got ter answer —an ye've got ter speak ther truth."

As they listened in surprised silence Turner's voice became sterner: "Ef ye lies ter ther High co'te thar's another co'te thet ye kain't lie ter. Now begone."

Then Bear Cat turned to the tall figure that had defeated Kinnard's determination to die uncaptured.

"We've done seed ther manner of yore fightin'," he said in the voice of one who would confer the accolade. "Now let's see what manner of face ye w'ars. I reckon we don't need ter go masked no longer, anyhow."

The mountaineer ripped off his hat and the black cloth which had covered his face—and Turner Stacy stood looking into the eyes of Lone Stacy, his father. For an instant he leaned forward incredulously, and his voice was strangely unsteady.

"How did ye git hyar," he demanded.

"They kept puttin' off my trial—ontil I reckon they wearied of hit," was the grave response. "Day before yistiddy ther jedge dismissed my case."

"But no man hain't nuver been with us afore without he was oath-bound—how did ye contrive hit?"

The old man smiled. "Dog Tate 'lowed I could take ther oath an' all ther rest of ther formalities in due time. He fixed me up an' brought me along. This hyar war a matter thet I was right interested in."

"I 'lowed," Turner's voice fell to a more confidential note, "I 'lowed ye mout be right wrathful at all I've been doin' since ye went away. Ye used ter berate me fer not lovin' blockadin'."

There was a momentary silence. The bearded man, somewhat thinner and more bent than when he had gone away to prison, and the son with a face more matured by these weeks and months, stood gazing into each other's eyes. To the reserve of each, outspoken sentiment came hard and even now both felt an intangible barrier of diffidence.

Then Lone Stacy answered gruffly, but there was an unsteadiness of feeling under his laconic reply.

"I've done showed ye how wrathful I air. I'm tolable old—but I reckon I kin still l'arn."

* * * *

Even when Kinnard Towers sat a prisoner in the courtroom which he had dominated, and heard Sam Carlyle, seeking to save his own neck by turning traitor, tell the lurid story of all his iniquities, an unbending doggedness characterized his attitude. As his eyes dwelt on the henchman who was swearing away his life, they burned so scornfully that the witness twisted and fidgeted and glanced sidewise with hangdog shame.

When the jury trooped in and stood lined solemnly before the bench, he gazed out of the window where the hills were beginning to soften their slaty monotone with a hint of tender

green. He did not need to hear them respond to the droning inquiries of the clerk, because he had read the verdict in their faces long before.

But when they had, for greater security, removed him to the Louisville jail and had put him in that row of cells reserved for those whose lives are forfeit to the law, it is doubtful whether that masklike inexpressiveness truly mirrored an inward phlegm.

There was an electric lamp fixed against the iron bars of the death corridor, turned inward like a spot-light of shame which was never dimmed either day or night—and there was a warden who paced the place, never leaving him unwatched —and Kinnard Towers had lived in places where eagles breed and where the air is wild and bites the lungs with its tang of freedom.

* * * *

It was June again—June full-bosomed and tuneful with the over-spilling melody of birds. Over the tall peaks arched a sky of such a pure and colorful blue that it, too, seemed to sing—and the little clouds that drifted placidly along were like the lazy sails of pleasure craft, floating in high currents. Along the dimmest and most distant ridges lay a violet mist that was all ash-of-dreams—but near at hand, whether on the upper levels of high hills or down in the shadowed recesses, where the small waters trickled, everything was color—color, bloom and song.

The rhododendron, which the mountaineer calls laurel, was abloom. The laurel, which is known in hill parlance as ivy, was gay with pink-hearted blossom. The mountain magnolia flaunted its great petals of waxen white and the wild rose nodded its frail face everywhere.

But these were details. Over the silver tinkle of happy little brooks was the low but infinite harping of the breeze, and over the glint of golden flecks on mossy rock, was the

sweep of sunlight and shadow across the majesty of towering peaks and the league-wide spread of valleys.

The hills were all singing of summer and rebirth, but as Bear Cat Stacy went riding across them his eyes were brooding with the thought of dreams that had not come true.

Many of them had come true, he told himself, in their larger aspects—even though he found himself miserably unsatisfied. There was a large reward in the manner of men and women who paused in their tasks of "drappin' an' kiverin'" along the sloping cornfields to wave their hats or their hands at him and to shout cheery words.

Those simple folk looked upon him as one who had led them out of bondage to a wider freedom, instilling into them a spirit of enterprise.

One farmer halted his plow and came to the fence as Bear Cat was riding by.

"I heers tell," he began, "thet ther whole world, pretty nigh, air at war an' thet corn's goin' ter be wuth money enough, this crop, ter pay fer haulin' hit."

Stacy nodded. "I reckon that's right," he said.

"An' I heers thet, deespite all contrary accounts, ther railroad aims ter come in hyar—an' pay fa'r prices."

Turner smiled. "They had ter come round to it," he answered. "There are more tons of coal in Marlin county than there are dollars in Jefferson county, and Jefferson county is the richest in the state."

The farmer rested his fore-arms on the top rail of the fence and gazed at the young man on horseback.

"I reckon us folks are right-smart beholden ter ye, Bear Cat," he suggested diffidently. "With a chief like you, we'll see prosperity yit."

"We don't have no chiefs here," declared the young man with a determined setting of his jaw. "We're all free and equal. The last chief was Kinnard Towers—and he's passed on."

"None-the-less, hit wouldn't amaze me none ter see ye git ter be the president of this hull world," declared the other with simple hero-worship. "Whar are ye ridin' ter?"

"I'm going over into Fletcher county to see that school there. I'm hopin' that we can have one like it over here."

The farmer nodded. "I reckon we kin manage hit," he affirmed.

Turner had heard much of that school to which Matthew Blakey had taken his three children—so much that all of it could hardly be true. Now he was going to see for himself.

But his thoughts, as he rode, were beyond his control and memories of Blossom crowded out the more impersonal things.

At last he came to a high backbone of ridge. From there he ought to be able to catch his first glimpse of the tract which the school had redeemed from overgrown raggedness into a model farm, but as yet the dense leafage along the way cut off the view of the valley.

Then he came to a more open space and reined in his horse, and as he looked out his eyes widened in astonishment.

Spreading below him, he saw such even and gracious spaces of cultivation as were elsewhere unknown to the hills.

Down there the fences were even and the fields smooth, but what astonished him most were the buildings. Clustered over a generous expanse of hill and valley, of field and garden all laid out as though some landscape gardener had made it a labor of love, were houses such as he had dreamed of—houses with dignity of line and proportion, with architectural beauty of design.

Everything, even at that distance, could be seen to be substantially designed for usefulness, and yet everything combined with that prime object of service the quality of art.

He was looking down on a tiny village, uncrowded and nestling on the varied levels of an undulating valley, and he counted out a dozen houses, recognizing some of them—the tiny hospital on its hill—the model dairies at one edge—the

saw-mill sending out its fragrance—the dormitories with sleeping porches and the school-buildings themselves. This was what he had visioned—and yet he realized how cramped had been his dream as he urged his tired horse forward and listened to the whistle of a bob-white in the stubble.

"Ef Blossom could know that we're goin' ter have a school like this over there!" he breathed to himself. Then as he rode along the twisting descent of road, between park-like forest trees and masses of rhododendron, and dismounted before a large house he saw a broad porch with a concrete foundation, and easy chairs and tables littered with magazines and books. From the door came a lady, smiling to greet him. It was Miss Pendleton, the woman who from small beginnings had built here in the wilderness such an achievement, and as she came to the stairs she held out her hand.

"I've been greatly interested in your letters, Mr. Stacy," she said, "and I don't see why we can't repeat over there what we have done here. We have grown from very small beginnings—and now I want to show you around our premises—unless you are too tired."

With wonderment that grew, he followed her, and a swarm of happy-faced children went with them; children keen of eye and rosy of cheek, and when they had inspected together the buildings where the pupils were taught from books, and the dairies and gardens where they were taught by practice, the lady showed him into a log house as artistic and charming as a swiss chalet and said: "This will be your abiding place while you're here. I'll send one of the boys to see that you have everything you need—and later on I'll introduce you to a lady who is much interested in your plans for a school on Little Slippery and who can discuss the details."

Left alone on the porch of his "pole-house," Bear Cat sat gazing upward to the American flag that floated from a tall staff before his door, and as he did so a small boy with

clear and intelligent eyes came and said: "I've done been named ter look atter ye."

In the young face was none of that somber shyness which shadows the faces of many mountain children. Turner put his hand on the boy's head. "Thank you, son," he said slowly. "Haven't I seen you before somewhar?"

The boy laughed. "I remembers *you,*" he asserted. "I seed ye when my paw was fotchin' me an' my brother an' sister over hyar. I'm Matthew Blakey's boy."

"You had right-sore eyes then, didn't you?"

The child laughed. "I did then—but I hain't now." After a moment's pause he added with a note of pride: "See thet flag? Hit's ther American flag an' hit's my job ter put hit up every day at sun-up an' take hit down at sun-set. I aims ter show ye right now how I does hit."

Bear Cat met young women from Eastern colleges who had come here to aid in the work. In their presence he felt very uncouth and ignorant, but they did not suspect that inner admission. They saw a young man who reminded them of a bronze athlete, with clear and fearless eyes, touched with a dreamer's zeal, and in his manner they recognized a simple dignity and an inherent chivalry.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON the porch of Miss Pendleton's house that night, guitars were tinkling. From inside came the glow of shaded lamps softly amber—and outside along the hillsides where the whippoorwills called plaintively, slept a silver wash of moonlight.

The stars were large and low-hanging and a pale mist tempered the slopes that rose in a nocturne of majesty and peace.

Bear Cat Stacy sat there immersed in reverie. He was seeing such a school grow up on the spot where he had hoped to build a house for Blossom and himself—then that vision faded and his face grew set because the other and more personal picture had intervened—the picture of the dwelling-house to which he had looked forward.

He did not notice that the guitars and the singing voices had come to silence, and that the white patches of the women's dresses had vanished from the shaded porch—he was looking out into the summer mists—and thinking his own thoughts.

Then he heard Miss Pendleton's voice, and came out of his abstraction with a start, looking about to realize for the first time that the two of them stood alone out there.

"Now you must talk business," smiled the lady. "I haven't introduced you yet to the person who is best of all fitted to discuss the details. She knows just what we seek to do here and how we do it. She knows the needs of mountain children, too—because she is a mountain girl herself. She came here really as a pupil—but she's much more than that now. She teaches the younger children while she studies herself—and she has developed a positive genius for this work."

Miss Pendleton paused and then added: "I'm going to let the two of you talk together first—and then I'll join you."

Bear Cat rose and stood courteously acquiescent, then his hostess left him and he saw another figure appear to stand framed in the door. His heart rose out of his breast into the throat and choked him, for he believed that his dreaming had unsettled his mind.

There stood Blossom with the amber light kindling her soft hair into a nimbus of radiance, and in her cheeks was the old color like the heart of the laurel's flower.

She stood slim and straight, no longer pallid or thin, and in her eyes danced a light of welcome.

"Blossom," he stammered—and she left her frame and its amber background to come forward—with her hands extended.

"Turney," was all she said.

"How came you here?" he demanded, forgetting to release her slim hands. "How did this come to pass?"

She looked out over the blue and silver leagues of the June night, and said simply. "There's lots to tell you—let's go out there and talk."

They were standing on a great bowlder where the moss and ferns grew, and about them twinkled myriads of fireflies. They had been silent for a long time and Turner's voice had a strained note as he said slowly. "I promised ye . . . thet I wouldn't ever pester ye again with . . . lovemaking . . . but to-night it's right hard ter keep thet pledge."

The breeze was stirring her hair and her own eyes were deep as she gazed away, but suddenly she turned and her long lashes were raised as she met his gaze.

"I don't want . . . that you should keep it," she whispered. "I give you back your pledge."

As in those old days the hills seemed to rock about him and the arms that came forward and paused were unsteady.

"Ye means . . . thet. . . ."

"I means thet I loved ye first, Turney." The words came tremulously, almost whispered, and in them was something of self-accusation. "Maybe I ought to be ashamed—but somehow I can't. All of what happened seems to me like a dream that doesn't really belong in my life. It seems to me that I was dazzled and couldn't tell the true from the seeming. . . . It seems as I look back that a little piece of my life was torn loose from the rest—but that the real me has always been yours."

She laid her hands on his shoulders, and as he caught her in his arms, the light breath of the night breeze brought the fragrance of honeysuckle to them both. She rested for a moment in his embrace with the serene feeling that she was at home.

Between them fell a silence but in the bath of silvery light through the fragrant stillness of dove gray night-tones and cobalt shadows the girl's eyes were brightly eloquent. Yet after a moment a shade of troubling thought came into them and the lips moved into the tremulousness of a self-searching and somewhat self-accusing whisper.

"Turney," she said, "there's one thing that I've got to say—and I guess it had better be now."

"If it's any fault you're finding with yourself—don't say it," he protested as his hands closed over her slender fingers. "There ain't anything that I need to have explained. I reckon I understand what happiness means and that's enough."

But Blossom shook her head.

"If I'd been straight loyal—like you've been, Turney, I reckon I couldn't ever have made any mistake. There wouldn't ever have been room for anybody but you." She paused and then went falteringly ahead. "From now on there won't ever be. You've known me always and yet even you can't realize how young and foolish and *plumb* ignorant I was a year ago. If I'd been just a *little* more experienced, it couldn't have happened. If things hadn't come with such a

rush after they began, that I was just swept along like a log in a spring-tide—it couldn't have happened." It seemed difficult for her to force the words, but she obeyed the mandate of her conscience with the candor of the confessional. "I never had the chance to think—until I came over here and began looking back. A person like I was doesn't think very clear in the midst of cyclones and confusions, and I didn't see that the real bigness was in you—more than in—him. I didn't see it until later. I'd grown up with you, and I took you too much for granted, I reckon, and everything he said or did seemed like a scrap out of a fairy story to my foolish mind."

There was one thing she did not tell him, even now; that she had learned at last through the lawyers what her husband's connection with the railroad plans had been. Back of all his fascination there had been a tarnished honesty, but that secret she still kept to herself.

But she lifted eyes to Turner that were wide open for his reading, and gravely she said: "I lost my way once—but I've found it again and if you can forget what a little fool I was at sixteen, you won't ever have need to doubt me any more."

"All thet's happened was worth goin' through—if it led to this," he declared in a husky whisper, and as she raised her lips to his her eyes were sparkling, and her words fell whimsically into dialect.

"Thet piece of bottom land down thar, Turney—I reckon we kin raise a dwellin'-house on hit now—a dwellin'-house an' a school-house, too."

THE END.

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